

The focus in Southeast Asia would soon shift to Vietnam, but in 1961, Laos was front and center.

# The Opening Bell in Laos

By John T. Correll



Photo via Vietnam News Agency

*A Pathet Lao unit listens to one of its members read a letter of commendation from its commander.*

**T**he first crisis John F. Kennedy faced as President was in Laos. On Jan. 19, 1961, the day before his inauguration, he met with his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the White House.

Eisenhower and his aides brought Kennedy and his advisors up to date on the civil war in Laos where government forces were on the verge of being overwhelmed by the combined strength of the communist rebels—the Pathet Lao—and their North Vietnamese allies.

According to Clark Clifford, who was taking notes for the Kennedy team,

Eisenhower stated, “If Laos should fall to the communists, then it would be just a question of time until South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma would collapse.” Eisenhower acknowledged he was passing on a dangerous “mess” and told Kennedy, “You might have to go in there and fight it out.”

Things went from bad to worse.

By March, communist forces, supported by Soviet airlift and supplies, threatened the royal Laotian capital at Luang Prabang and the seat of government at Vientiane.

Kennedy disclosed the scope of the problem in a televised press conference

March 23, using a backdrop of three maps with red markings showing how much territory the Pathet Lao had captured in the previous six months.

“It’s quite obvious that if the communists were able to move in and dominate this country, it would endanger the security of and the peace of all Southeast Asia,” he said, and that “no one should doubt our resolution” for the independence of Laos.

Historian Lawrence Freedman, in the book *Kennedy’s Wars*, noted the crisis “tends to be forgotten because it was eventually subsumed into the larger Vietnam problem and did not result in



**Laos served mainly as a buffer zone between her more powerful and antagonistic neighboring nations.**

any direct American military commitments, but until the last few months of his life, it took up more of Kennedy's time than Vietnam."

Special Counsel and Kennedy confidant Ted Sorensen agreed. "During his first two months in office, Kennedy devoted more time and task force studies to this subject than to any other," he said.

Eventually, a cease-fire and an international agreement at Geneva brought a façade of stability to Laos, and Kennedy was able to turn his attention to other matters, including Vietnam. In actuality, the fighting in Laos continued with the United States deeply involved in both clandestine and conventional conflicts. The US Air Force flew its last combat mission in Laos in April 1973, almost three months after the cease-fire in Vietnam.

The crisis of 1961 had its roots in the breakup of the French colonial empire

in Indochina, which once consisted of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

### Land of the Pork Chop

The kingdom of Laos existed for 600 years, but was a cohesive nation in name only. Most of it was mountainous, with the open and level ground lying mainly around the Plain of Jars in the middle of the country and along the Mekong River on the border with Thailand. There were no seaports, no railroads, and no paved roads in the hinterlands. The remote villages had little interest in other parts of the country or in the distant government in Vientiane.

"Laos is neither a geographic nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience," said Bernard B. Fall, war correspondent and historian of the conflicts in Indochina. There was an "absence of a feeling of national unity,"

he said. "Patriotism in Laos is at best a furious regionalism."

The shape of Laos has been likened to a pork chop, which is symbolic of the way it has been traditionally seen by others. At the time, Laos had boundaries with six neighboring nations that used Laos freely for their own purposes. At best, it served as a buffer zone between the more powerful nations that surrounded it. Laos had no strategic value in its own right. US Secretary of State Dean Rusk called it "the wart on the hog of Vietnam."

Laos had been a French protectorate since 1893, but colonial rule was interrupted by the Japanese occupation in World War II. When the Japanese left, the viceroy, Prince Phetsarath Rattanavongsa—a member of the junior branch of the royal family and acting Prime Minister—declared independence, and the national assembly deposed the king.

In 1946, French troops from reoccupied Vietnam parachuted into Laos, overcame the ill-trained Laotian forces, and restored the king in a constitutional monarchy within the French Union. Phetsarath went into exile, but his two younger brothers, who were part of his short-lived government, would dominate Laotian politics for the next 30 years.

Prince Souvanna Phouma was Phetsarath's minister of public works and Prince Souphanouvong was commander of the armed forces. Souvanna Phouma would be Prime Minister four times between 1951 and 1975. He was an engineer, educated in France, was courtly, westernized, pragmatic, and steady. His destiny, Fall said, was "that of being an intermediary between irreconcilable extremes."

Souphanouvong, the "Red Prince," was Souvanna's half-brother, but his mother was a commoner unlike Souvanna's mother, who was of royal blood. He was more accomplished than Souvanna in many respects but his abilities were less recognized. When he returned from France with an engineering degree of his own, he was insulted by the low-paying job he was offered. He went to Vietnam where he spent the World War II years and met Ho Chi Minh, leader of the communist Viet Minh, who became his patron.

After the French returned, Souvanna Phouma worked within the system and was chosen Prime Minister for the first time in 1951. Souphanouvong joined forces with the Viet Minh who were fighting the French in Vietnam. In 1950, he founded the communist Pathet Lao and established his stronghold in the rugged northeastern province of Sam Neua.



**Boun Oum**



**Souvanna Phouma**



**Prince Souphanouvong**

The United States did not approve of colonialism but sided with the French because of concerns about the spread of communism. The Eisenhower Administration, like the Truman Administration before it, was under pressure not to make deals with the communists in Indochina.

### Dominoes and Coups

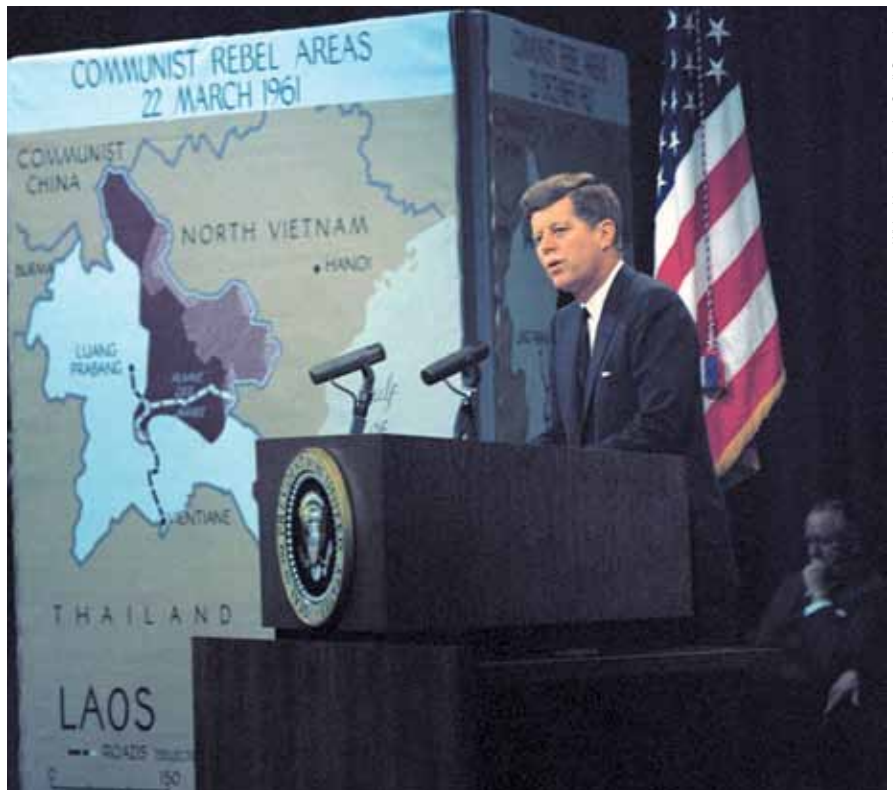
At a news conference on April 7, 1954, Eisenhower proclaimed the “Domino Theory”—which became the basis for US policy until the end of the Vietnam War 20 years later. “You have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the ‘falling domino’ principle,” Eisenhower said. “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.”

French rule of Indochina came to a crashing end with the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. In July, an international conference in Geneva imposed a settlement, partitioning Vietnam and declaring Laos and Cambodia independent. The United States was not a signatory to the accord but agreed to abide by it and supported the Royal Laotian Army with a cash subsidy and covert military advice. The CIA was active in Laos from 1955 forward. “The Eisenhower Administration spent some \$300 million and five years in the hopeless effort to convert Laos into a clearly pro-western, formally anti-communist military outpost on the borders of Red China and North Vietnam,” Sorensen said.

The resilient Souvanna Phouma was named Prime Minister for the second time in 1956 and established a coalition including Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao. The rising communist influence led the United States to cut off financial aid and in 1958, Souvanna was forced out.

Between December 1959 and December 1960, the government changed hands repeatedly in a series of coups and countercoups. With US help, a pro-western general, Phoumi Novasan (ironically, once chief of staff to Souphanouvong) took control in a coup in December 1959 and clamped down on the Pathet Lao. Phoumi had the support of his cousin, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, leader of Thailand.

In August 1959, on a day when Phoumi was out of town, an obscure paratroop captain named Kong Le managed to seize Vientiane and invited Souvanna Phouma to establish a neutralist government. Thus Souvanna became Prime Minister for the third time.



White House photo by Cecil Stoughton

**President John Kennedy uses a color graphic at a press conference on March 23, 1961. He didn't make public at the time that a US contingency force was on alert in Asia, or that 300 marines and 16 B-26 bombers were covertly positioned in Thailand.**

Souvanna and Kong Le joined in a partnership with the Pathet Lao and obtained airlift support from the Soviet Union. On Dec. 8, Souvanna relieved the headstrong Kong Le from command but the next day, Kong Le deposed Souvanna. However, Souvanna refused to resign and departed into exile, and a leftist minister was appointed to replace him.

Phoumi chased Kong Le out of Vientiane Dec. 16 and set up a new government with yet another Laotian prince, Boun Oum, as Prime Minister. The real power

was Phoumi, who retained portfolios as deputy Prime Minister and minister of defense. Kong Le established a new base of operations on the Plain of Jars.

As 1960 began, the situation had devolved into a multisided civil war. The main battleground was the Plain of Jars, a rolling grassland 500 square miles, where hundreds of ancient stone jars dotted the landscape.

### Kennedy's Options

The meeting with Eisenhower was not Kennedy's first knowledge of the Laotian crisis. It was covered along with other national security issues in sessions with his transition team. “Whatever's going to happen in Laos, an American invasion, a communist victory, or whatever, I wish it would happen before we take over and get blamed for it,” Kennedy mused to Sorensen.

The Royal Laotian Army was notoriously poor at fighting and in January, an attempt by Phoumi to drive Kong Le off the Plain of Jars failed. Kennedy was far from enthusiastic about continuing to support Phoumi. “If that's our strong man, we're in trouble,” he said.

The situation got worse. In March, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese moved into the Laotian panhandle where the Ho Chi Minh Trail was formed as an infiltration route to South Vietnam. Kong Le



**Kong Le on Time Magazine's June 26, 1964, issue.**

broke out of the Plain of Jars, pushing the Royal Laotian Army backward. The road to Vientiane lay open but amazingly he did not take advantage of it. As an alternate and more effective force to fight the communists, the CIA recruited some 5,000 Hmong tribesmen and their charismatic leader, Vang Pao.

In March, a US Interagency Task Force produced a “17-step escalation ladder” in which the high option was the deployment of 60,000 US troops supported by airpower. In April, the Joint Chiefs raised the projection of the force required from 120,000 to 140,000 with possible authority to use nuclear weapons.

One fact Kennedy left out of his March 23 press conference was that a US contingency force was on alert in Asia and 300 marines and 16 propeller-driven B-26 bombers were pre-positioned covertly in Thailand in case the communists made a run for Vientiane.

Kennedy still subscribed to the Domino Theory. “Quite obviously, if Laos fell into communist hands, it would increase the danger along the northern frontiers of Thailand,” he said in April. “It would put additional pressure on Cambodia and would put additional pressure on South Vietnam, which in itself would put additional pressure on Malaya.”

According to Sorensen, Kennedy decided he had four choices. He could let the Pathet Lao take Laos, which was unacceptable to him. He could provide enough military backing for the pro-Western forces to win. “This was in effect the policy he inherited,” Sorensen said, but he ruled out a land war in Laos. Third, he could accept partition of the country, but that would leave him vulnerable to criticism from his political opponents. The fourth choice, and the one he took, was to negotiate for the restoration of a neutralist government. That meant “supporting as premier the same Souvanna Phouma whom this country had previously condemned,” Sorensen said.

Kennedy sent the message by diplomatic backchannels to the Soviets and the Chinese that he was open to settlement but was prepared to intervene militarily if needed to prevent a hostile takeover of Laos.

### The Fraudulent Peace

The International Control Commission, which had overseen the 1954 Geneva Accords, was reactivated. A cease-fire took effect May 11, but negotiations for a permanent arrangement dragged out for more than a year.

The three princes—Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum—met

several times and agreed to form a tripartite government. They eventually settled on a coalition with Souvanna as Prime Minister and the other two as deputies. Souvanna began his fourth and longest tour in office June 1962.

The new Geneva Accord, promulgated in July, declared Laos neutral and ordered all foreign military forces to leave. The United States withdrew its military presence but North Vietnam did not. No more than 40 of the 7,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos went home. The civil war went on. The Geneva agreement took the pressure off Kennedy and freed him to pursue other matters. He concluded that if a stand had to be made in Indochina, Vietnam was a better place to do it. After he was assassinated in November 1963, the war in Southeast Asia was left to the Johnson, then Nixon Administrations to resolve.

The Pathet Lao soon split away from the coalition and clashes with the neutralists became frequent. The rift widened until Souphanouvong declared in 1964 that the Pathet Lao no longer recognized Souvanna as Prime Minister.

Kong Le was appointed Chief of the Army in November 1962. His exploits were sufficient for him to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine* in June 1964, but he was as difficult as ever and was dismissed in November 1966. As for Phoumi, he led a failed coup attempt in February 1965 and fled the country.

The United States struck a strange bargain with Souvanna Phouma. The Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle was the critical lifeline of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. Souvanna gave permission for US aerial interdiction bombing on the trail. In return, US airpower conducted a major campaign in northern Thailand to stave off defeat for the weak Laotian government. “I am a good friend to communists abroad,” Souvanna said, “but I do not like them here at home.”

The war in Laos was kept secret from the American public until 1970, both because the conflict—like the continuing North Vietnamese participation—was a violation of the Geneva Accords and because the Laotians did not want to draw international attention. Between 1968 and 1973, the US flew 401,296 strike sorties in Laos, almost as many as it did in North and South Vietnam combined.

“Starting in the mid-1960s, the United States found itself extending increasing

support to Premier Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist leader whom we had originally opposed but who had been recognized as the leader by all sides in the 1962 Geneva Accords,” said Henry Kissinger, national security advisor during the last years of US involvement in Vietnam. “Our purpose was to maintain a neutralist government and also to secure Souvanna’s acquiescence in our efforts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail.”

### The Third Domino

The US settlement in Vietnam was already in effect when the United States flew its last combat mission in Laos, April 17, 1973. B-52 bombers, taking off from Guam, attacked targets south of the Plain of Jars because of communist cease-fire violations.

The governments the United States had supported in Southeast Asia did not last long after the Paris Peace Accords. The Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh and Cambodia April 17, 1975. The North Vietnamese took Saigon April 30, 1975—marking the end of the war in Vietnam.

Laos became what historian Timothy N. Castle called “the Third Domino” in Indochina when the Pathet Lao, supported by more than 50,000 North Vietnamese troops still in Laos, seized power. The Laotian monarchy was replaced Dec. 2, 1975, by the Laotian People’s Democratic Republic. Souvanna Phouma resigned. Military personnel above the grade of lieutenant were treated as war criminals and the practice of Buddhism was curtailed.

King Sisavang Vatthana abdicated but he and his family were sent to a re-education camp. The king, queen, and crown prince were imprisoned in a cave in a remote area of Laos where they later died from lack of adequate food and medical care.

Souphanouvong was named President of Laotian People’s Democratic Republic, a largely ceremonial post, which he held until stepping down in 1986 because of failing health.

When Souvanna Phouma left office for the final time in 1975, he had served a cumulative total of almost 20 years as Prime Minister. He continued to live in Laos and served for a while as advisor to the new government. He stood beside his brother, the Red Prince, to review a parade in 1977.

He died in 1984 at his villa on the banks of the Mekong and lay in state in a government building in Vientiane. ■

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*John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “The Grenada Adventure,” appeared in the November issue.*