

Lyin' 'bout Laos

Hugo Hill

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VIENTIANE, Laos—Dick Nixon is up to his old tricks again. On March 6 he issued a policy statement on Laos, supposedly to give the American people “full information” on the background and present situation in this country.

Like Nixon himself, the statement is devious and deceptive.

Nixon portrays the U.S. as a reluctant warrior, assisting hapless little Laos, at the request of the government, to resist “foreign aggression.” The record is different.

Nixon makes much of the fact that in the 1961–62 negotiations which led to the Geneva Accords on Laos both North Vietnam and the Soviet Union supported Prince Souvanna Phouma for his present role as Prime Minister.

The claim is true, but Nixon leaves out some important history. Souvanna Phouma at that time was a genuine neutralist, on good terms with the revolutionary Pathet Lao.

Souvanna had headed the Laotian government until December 1960, when a CIA-sponsored right-wing coup ousted him. He then went into exile in Cambodia and a few months later slipped back into Laos to set up a joint neutralist-leftist headquarters on the Plain of Jars. This anti-fascist coalition was maintained by a Soviet Air-lift of vital supplies.

All the socialist powers called for a neutralized Laos and continued to back up the neutralist- leftist coalition headed by Souvanna Phouma as an alternative to the right-wing junta supported by the U.S.

When the Geneva conference opened in May 1961 the United States still supported the clique of right-wing generals who had illegally seized power in December 1960. President Kennedy spoke then of the “support for the present duly constituted government.”

The U.S. supported the right-wing junta, until May 1962 when it became apparent that they were betting on a loser. The turning point came in May 1962 when the Pathet Lao liberated Nam Tha, the last bastion of junta strength in north-western Laos. Only then did the U.S. throw in the towel and agree to a neutralist coalition government.

Souvanna Phouma was chosen to head the new government, but though he is still the Prime Minister, the present government is not the same as the one that was agreed upon at Geneva.

In April 1964 the rightists, again supported by the CIA, staged another coup. The result, this time, was not a complete seizure of state power but a new coalition. The Pathet Lao then announced that it no longer recognized Souvanna Phouma’s government and withdrew.

In the course of this political breakdown, the neutralist forces split among themselves. Some (the so-called “dissident neutralists”) went into the hills and allied themselves with the Pathet Lao; others, including Souvanna Phouma, stayed in Vientiane and joined the rightists.

During the eight years since the Geneva Conference, Souvanna Phouma has moved from left-of-center to right-of-center (he was never as left-wing as the Pathet Lao, and is not yet as right wing as, say, Thieu

and Ky), and in the process he has become totally dependent on American aid, which shores up both his economy and his army.

To claim, as Nixon does, that “the present Government of Laos (is) the one originally proposed and approved by the Communists” is patently ridiculous. This distortion is only one of a series of fabrications designed to maintain popular support for further involvement in Southeast Asia. Note the following examples:

NIXON: There are 67,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos.

FACT: Even U.S. military attaches here (and they are the ones who provide Nixon with his information) claim only 40,000 North Vietnamese troops, and even that number is undoubtedly exaggerated.

NIXON: “There are no American ground combat troops in Laos.”

FACT: Armed Green Berets regularly go on patrol with Laotian mercenaries.

NIXON: “No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground, combat operations.”

FACT: More than twenty Americans, mostly Green Berets, have been killed here.

NIXON: “In every instance our combat air operations have taken place only over those parts of Laos occupied and contested by North Vietnamese and other Communist forces.”

FACT: Of course. The U.S. bombs only liberated territory; but that territory has a population of more than a million people, and American bombing has completely devastated the people’s villages and farms.

NIXON: “The U.S. government directly or indirectly employs 1,040 Americans in Lao’s.”

FACT: Nixon fails to count the Green Berets stationed in secret camps and those who commute daily from their base in Udorn, Thailand.

NIXON: “We support both the 1962 Geneva Agreements and the legitimate government of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.”

FACT: Nixon can’t have it both ways. Since the present right-wing dominated government was set up by a coup and not by the Geneva Agreements, it is not legitimate.

Nixon’s statement, designed to quash popular opposition to another imperialist venture in Southeast Asia, is a fraud. By focusing on North Vietnamese involvement here, Nixon hopes to cover up the massive American escalation that has occurred in the last year.

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