

Hitch-hiking in Laos

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It's weird.

Future historians, in analyzing the causes of the Laotian War (or World War II as the case may be) will be stumped by a curious footnote which will cause them to take off (or put on) their spectacles, shake their heads slowly, and say, "it's weird." They will be amazed, of course, at the presence of "hippies" in Laos and the part they play politically in the games of intrigue that are so characteristic of Laotian government.

First, it is necessary to note that Laos, aside from being "The Land of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol," aside from bordering on almost every major Southeast Asian country including China and the Vietnams, aside from being governed by a shaky and sometimes non-existent coalition government, is also one of the few places in the world where marijuana and hashish are absolutely, totally, and completely legal. Consequently, the beleaguered Westerner finds life in Laos idyllic, as the setting of an enchanted fairy tale. Complications are not created by the Laotians (who attach no importance to the fact -that marijuana—called "ganja" locally—is sold in the Vientiane marketplace at the tobacco stalls) but by the Americans (who else?) who tire conscientiously dedicated to the development and enlightenment of the Laotian people.

There is growing in Vientiane a curious arms race, on the one hand, the American presence makes itself felt with increased aid to the Royalist government (\$67 million a year), American "advisers," U.S.A.I.D. rice, Air America and Continental Airways (two airlines run by the CIA. in support of the Lao Royalist Troop), a U.S. road construction project that will, when completed, make it easier to deploy troops from Vientiane (the major city) to Luang and on the other hand, hitchhikers from all over the world have convened in cafes, on Rue Dong Palane to smoke opium (in illegal but well-protected dens), open discotheques, bongos, give light shows, and generally blow their minds in a paranoia-free atmosphere. One enterprising young Frenchman named Max makes and sells some of the finest joints in SE Asia and, in the spirit of supply and demand capitalism, he does quite well.

U.S. officials in Laos are nervous, concerned, baffled, and frustrated by all this. The "hippies" (Or "hitchhikers" as they call themselves) are a factor that never entered into the planned U.S. intervention (and take-over) of foreign countries and the whole situation leaves the CIA, embarrassingly short of tactics.

The Laotian people must regard with amusement the rival groups of "phalangs" (foreigners): rigid, bourgeois, crew-cut types who drink liquor, talk about increased crop production, worry about strengthening the royalist troops and defeating the Pathet Lao (Laotian version of the Viet Cong) while colorful, marijuana-smoking hitchhikers float around Vientiane in native garb working in various and ingenious ways to sustain the mythic existence of life in Laos (where rent is \$30 a month, food is one dollar a day, grass is practically free, the weather is sunny and the Mekong River flows nearby).

Imagine some poor State Department official as he surveys his task. Vietnam was easier, he thinks. In Vietnam, all that was necessary was barbed wire and a few soldiers. But the Laotian people are not civilized. They don't care about the war between the royalist troops and the Pathet Lao (which is fought, incidentally, by the Americans and

the North Vietnamese). The Laotians don't care about ideology, about the Communist Threat, about The Yellow Peril, about the U.S. information Service. Indeed, the Laotian people don't care about anything. They are uneducated. (They are stoned.) The Laotian people are not interested in Stopping Communist Aggression; and, as if things weren't bad enough, these hippies come in and reinforce this unconcern about Reality. Damn dirty unwashed filthy beatniks. Their growing prominence in Vientiane and their evangelistic missions to outlying villages endangers the whole infrastructure of war and destruction that the United States has planned ("at the invitation of the Prime Minister") for the country of Laos.

As must be the case, this situation abounds with improbable personalities. There is a guiding light behind the circus of faces that hitchhike to Vientiane and stay ("It's incredible: I came to Vientiane for a look around and I've been here six months" is a common complaint) and that guiding light is one of the most improbable personalities Dr. Sheldon Cholst, a wealthy psychiatrist from New York who is waging his own private war against Insanity by dropping out and supporting, in Laos, the influx of artists, writers, creators, inventors, hitchhikers, adventurers and maniacs who gather joyously at Dr. Cholst's cafe, The Third Eye, and discuss, amidst the smell of hashish, the coming consciousness revolution.

Says Cholst, "I am a psychiatrist by profession and American society is very sick. As a physician, I would be remiss if I did not prescribe a remedy; it is useless reconstructing the mental health of individuals when the whole environment of life in America is so unhealthy. For this situation, I prescribe marijuana. Marijuana would serve to relax and stimulate the American people, thereby liberating their creative energies without further aggravating the prevailing situation of guilt, paranoia and aggressiveness." Dr. Cholst has, in addition to lending financial support to The Third Eye, written a Constitution for The World where he advocates, among other things, an annual stipend for everyone by virtue of their Right Not to Work. The career of Dr. Cholst reads like the riot act and he is not the only "phalang" that causes officials in the U.S. embassy to wring their hands in despair.

The arms race in both the "hippie" and the "army" camps has escalated with Vietnamese regularity. As the fighting between the Pathet Lao and the royalist troops (U.S. supplied and financed) ebbs and flows, the number of U.S. generals that can be seen chauffeured through the streets of Vientiane in black unmarked cars increases. It is no secret that the U.S. has been bombing Pathet Lao controlled areas of Laos (which, by the way, may be well over 50% of the country) where the North Vietnamese take refuge. While U.S. supplied planes streak through the air bringing rice to the "friendly" troops and bombs to the "enemy," U.S.A.I.D. officials show the People (in order to Win their Hearts and Minds), propaganda films at the local Buddhist temple which, I was amused to note one night, included old travelogues and an army training film on combat techniques.

But no one seems to be taking the Americans and their Holy Mission seriously, except for the few Laotian generals who benefit financially from all the talk about "security" (which is fast becoming the most dangerous and deadly word in the American language). The supreme tolerance of the Laotian people is manifested by the fact that they put up with both the pushy, self-seeking Americans and the gentle, bizarre hitchhikers. The Laotians accept aid (guns and rice) from the former and sell opium to the latter, perfectly content to let considerations of communism, morality, or philosophy go undiscussed. The thinly disguised hostility between the rival groups of "phalangs" is considered to be an internal affair and the Laotians stay out of it, granting visas and visa extensions impartially.

American officials are afraid, most likely, of the establishment of a permanent Vientiane-based artist colony because the members of such a colony are openly hostile to the war next door in Vietnam and are not reluctant to work actively to prevent such an occurrence in Laos. If the fledgling community on Rue Dong Palane can become economically self-sufficient (as it is tending to become), the position of the U.S. influence in Laos will be weakened in a very subtle and important way.

The hitchhikers and the resident European community (primarily French businessmen left over from colonial days) can unite to give the Laotians more options in dealing with the Western world than just the traditional Asian ritual of accepting American "aid" and yielding to American pressure. The colony that is entrenching itself on Dong Palane contains many educated, talented people who can offer the Laotians instruction in many of the skills and methods of Western society. These people would actually make better teachers—whether the subject be airplane mechanics or English—than the U.S.A.I.D. people because their life-style is closer to the Laotian than that of the American U.S.A.I.D. official and this implies acceptance of (or at least great respect for) Lao religious and cultural values.

The American comes into Asian societies like a bull in a china shop, blind to the subtleties of Eastern thought and antagonistic to the rhythmic, cyclical slowness and (in)efficiency of life in Asia. The contact between East and West demands not that the East abandon its centuries-old heritage and copy Western habits, but that both viewpoints (the agrarian and the industrial) yield, change, and grow. A failure to communicate culturally in this confrontation can and does have disastrous results—as the war in Vietnam clearly shows.

Two types of Westerner has emerged in reaction to the contact between East and West and these two types are in cold but serious war in Vientiane. The first type regards Western ways as being superior and seeks to impose them on the East. The second type realizes that Eastern civilization is a deep and rich source of wisdom from which even Westerners can learn much, and, consequently, he adopts a more receptive attitude toward the Oriental viewpoint. The tension that exists between these two personalities is at once amusing and serious.

The phenomenon of “hippies” (or pro-Oriental Westerners) in Laos is interesting, but its significance is more sociological than political. The people who leave their warm, secure homes in the West to travel through mystic India and finally settle in the smoky corners of Vientiane generally shun history and politics. These people are forced onto the historical stage because of circumstances—(1) the coincidence of a senseless, brutal war being fought next door in Vietnam and (2) they symbolize the collapse of indigenous values in the West.

It is an illusion of American officials that the ideological complexion of Asia is vital to the defense of the United States—and the influx of “hippies” into Asia is suspicious in the sense that it deviates from the strong, straight, pro-American line that the U.S. has been trying to cultivate with money and “aid.” To the eyes of U.S. generals, the “hippies” are undermining everything that the U.S. has accomplished in Asia (including death and destruction) and should martial law ever be declared in Laos (as it often is) these people will be the first to receive expulsion orders. It is the nature of the “cold war” between the hitchhikers and the army that is serious.

But another aspect of this subtle rivalry is amusing. Dr. Cholst, who lives on the Thatdam (Laotian embassy row) struck fear into the hearts of U.S. embassy officials by placing a sign on his gate that read “The Free U.S. Embassy.” Dr. Cholst declared himself the Ambassador to Laos representing all Americans who are “internally free.” The Laotians and the hitchhikers found this incident to be highly amusing; the U.S. embassy (which is five hundred yards away from “The Free U.S. Embassy”) was not so easily pleased.

According to Dr. Cholst, he removed the sign when the C.I.A. began making serious attempts on his life. Such is politics in Laos. It’s weird.

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