

THE US AND THE LAO CIVIL WAR

Kennedy's foreign policy and Lao Hmong experiences (1961-1963)

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

MASTER THESIS

Master International Relations in Historical Perspective

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Date: 15 June 2020

Word count: 14.154

Abstract

This thesis examines the intervention of the Kennedy administration (1961-1963) in the Lao Civil War (1959-1975) and how this was experienced by the Lao Hmong. As multiple foreign countries were involved in the Lao Civil War, and because of the combat between the Royal Lao Government and the communist Pathet Lao, the conflict was drawn into the global Cold War struggle. This thesis focuses on how Kennedy perceived and waged the Cold War in general, but also more specifically in Southeast Asia and Laos. Furthermore, this thesis investigates Kennedy's intentions in Laos and how these manifested in his foreign policy by means of archival sources. Next to that, the experience of the Lao Hmong people vis-à-vis American involvement in their country is examined through analysing interviews with Lao Hmong people. Exposing both the American and Hmong sides provides for a comprehensive overview of the conflict. Accordingly, this research has found that Kennedy considered eliminating the communist threat in Southeast Asia as highly important. However, as Kennedy's presidency evolved, he decided not to do so by intervening militarily in Laos. Instead, he chose to focus on fighting communism in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, in the following years, the CIA kept providing secret support for the Lao Hmong in their combat against the communists in Laos. For the Americans, the Hmong were merely assets to reach their goal. However, for the Hmong, their motive was rather different. After all, they fought against the communists only trying to preserve their lands and livelihoods. Despite these different motives, they collaborated because they had the same goal of defeating communism.

Keywords: Cold War, Lao Civil War, US foreign policy, Kennedy Administration, Lao Hmong

Abbreviations

FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
HOHP	Hmong Oral History Project
ICC	International Control Commission
JFK	John F. Kennedy
NSA	National Security Archive
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PEO	Programs Evaluation Office
RLA	Royal Lao Army
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SU	Soviet Union
UN	United Nations
US	United States

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Introduction

Introduction research subject

“... And the Hmong became our guys ... We knew enough to know that these guys were really good. You know, they were really good at what they did. They were great soldiers, they were easily trained, they were willing, and we really looked to them to sort of spearhead this effort, to not only maintain a constant interdiction effort on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but also to preserve a pro-Western Laos as well. And so we were sort of cast in the role of overseers, payers, recruiters, trainers, suppliers, but they were the guys doing the fighting. And it took an incredible toll on their people ...”¹

- Jim Anderson (CIA officer in Laos)

The passage above is an excerpt from an interview with CIA officer Jim Anderson, who served in Laos during John F. Kennedy’s presidency (1961-1963). This interview is part of a series of interviews regarding the experiences of Lao Hmong refugees that went through the Lao Civil War (1959-1975).² The Hmong people are a Lao ethnic minority and became victims of the fighting in Laos during this conflict. Since 1959, the right-wing Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the left-wing Pathet Lao fought for control in Laos. Both factions gained foreign support from different countries at certain times. The Pathet Lao received support from the communist North Vietnamese and the Lao government was backed by the United States (US) in its efforts to counter communist insurgencies.³

The US was already involved in Laos since the early days of the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration (1953-1961). He had always been highly concerned about the growth of communism in Laos. Although Eisenhower made great efforts to defeat communism there

¹ Concordia University, Hmong Studies, Hmong Oral History Project (HOHP), Interview with Jim Anderson. (Hereafter: Concordia University, HOHP, Interviewed person).

² To address someone or something from Laos, this thesis will use “Lao” instead of “Laotian”. Although both terms are used interchangeably, they differ significantly. “Laotian” was introduced by the French during their colonial occupation (1893-1945) and remained a representation for Laos under French occupation after decolonisation. “Lao” meant Laos in charge of its own destiny. Nowadays, the people from Laos do not use the word “Laotian”. Therefore, this thesis will use “Lao” when addressing someone or something from Laos. ‘Is it “Lao” or “Laotian”? In Laos, There’s a Big Difference’, *The Culture Trip* (blog), accessed 11 April 2020, <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/laos/articles/is-it-lao-or-laotian-in-laos-theres-a-big-difference/>.

³ Christopher Paul et al., ‘Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies’ (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), 147.

during his presidency, he had not succeeded. When he had to pass on the baton to Kennedy in January 1961, Eisenhower urged him that he would have to start preparing for a military intervention in Laos soon in order to defeat the communists.⁴ Kennedy, however, decided not to intervene. This thesis will examine Kennedy's foreign policy in Laos and how he came to this decision not to intervene. Instead, Kennedy wanted to depart from Eisenhower's focus on covert, unconventional and offensive combats against communism around the world.⁵ In this thesis, the comparison with Eisenhower will often be made when discussing Kennedy's foreign policy in Laos. This way, Kennedy's foreign policy can be clarified and placed in a broader perspective.

Even though Kennedy did not intervene to defeat the Pathet Lao, he agreed to establish a Lao coalition government in 1962 that included the communists. The agreement also demanded that foreign forces had to be withdrawn from Laos. Although the US agreed to this demand, the CIA continued its support for the Hmong soldiers and their fight against communist control.⁶ As the quote from Jim Anderson broadly shows how the CIA perceived its work with the Hmong, this thesis aims to examine how the Lao Hmong experienced American involvement during the conflict. To conduct this research, the following research question will be posed: "How was the intervention of the Kennedy administration in the Lao Civil War (1961-1963) experienced by the Lao Hmong?" To answer this research question, several aspects will be examined. First of all, how the Lao Civil War emerged and developed will be explored, subsequently, Kennedy's foreign policy in Laos will be investigated and, lastly, the role of the Lao Hmong people in the Civil War will be discussed. The methodology part of this introduction elaborates on how these subjects will be examined.

Historiography

Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy is a highly debated subject among scholars. Although the first chapter of this thesis contains an extensive literature review, the following short overview presents the conceptions of some of the most relevant studies.

How Kennedy perceived the Cold War and wanted to wage it, remains a topic on which scholars are divided. Some scholars have described his foreign policy as fierce, while others

⁴ Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, 'What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception', *The Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 573.

⁵ Michael McClintock, 'The Kennedy Crusade: A Dynamic National Strategy to Defeat the Communists', in *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940-1990*, 2002, <https://www.statecraft.org/chapter6.html>.

⁶ Paul et al., 'Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies', 151.

have called it cautious. Thomas Paterson, for example, has described Kennedy as fierce because he strove to win the Cold War and took multiple risks to reach this goal.⁷ Others have also argued that Kennedy had more in common with Cold Warrior Eisenhower than often is presented.⁸ In contrast, several scholars that have examined Kennedy's foreign policy have shown that he was more cautious in his Cold War approach.⁹ After all, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's communist rhetoric frightened Kennedy. Hence, he did not want to provoke Khrushchev and risk escalation of a crisis.¹⁰

Along with being cautious or fierce, how Kennedy perceived the use of military means is also extensively discussed in the existing literature. For example, John Lewis Gaddis has argued that preventing nuclear war was at the top of Kennedy's priority list throughout his presidency.¹¹ Others have also argued that Kennedy aimed for a nuclear test ban since the day he took office.¹² Along these lines, several scholars have argued that the year 1963 can be considered as a turning point in the Cold War. In particular, the signing of the nuclear test ban treaty in 1963 marked the shift from a dangerous Cold War rivalry towards a more peaceful and harmonious future.¹³

Regarding Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy in Southeast Asia specifically, Lawrence Freedman argued that, even though Kennedy approached the Cold War cautiously, he was eager to counter communism around the globe safely and effectively.¹⁴ Various scholars have also

⁷ Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

⁸ Jennifer W. See, 'An Uneasy Truce: John F. Kennedy and Soviet-American Détente, 1963', *Cold War History* 2, no. 2 (2002): 163; Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 4.

⁹ Timothy Naftali, 'Khrushchev and Kennedy', *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 4 (2018): 532; Aiyaz Husain, 'Covert Action and US Cold War Strategy in Cuba, 1961-62', *Cold War History* 5, no. 1 (2005): 26, 38; Raymond L. Garthoff, *A Journey Through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 186; Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 568.

¹⁰ W.R. Smyser, *Kennedy and the Berlin Wall: 'A Hell of a Lot Better than a War'* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 2; Donald A. Carter, 'The US Military Response to the 1960-1962 Berlin Crisis', *The US Army Center of Military History*, accessed 22 March 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/foreign-policy/cold-war/1961-berlin-crisis/overview/us-military-response.pdf>.

¹¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 74.

¹² Andreas Wenger and Marcel Gerber, 'John F. Kennedy and the Limited Test Ban Treaty: A Case Study of Presidential Leadership', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (June 1999): 480; Norman Friedman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 274-275.

¹³ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 261; See, 'An Uneasy Truce: John F. Kennedy and Soviet-American Détente, 1963,' 162; Jason K. Duncan, *John F. Kennedy: The Spirit of Cold War Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 109; Frederik Logevall and Campbell Craig, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 197; Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xii.

¹⁴ Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, xii.

discussed how Kennedy considered the importance of eliminating communism in Southeast Asia to protect American interests and security in this region.¹⁵

Kennedy's foreign policy during the Lao Civil War, in particular, is often only discussed in studies about the Vietnam War.¹⁶ This is not surprising since the events in Vietnam and Laos were largely connected. Therefore, Kennedy's decision-making in one of the countries also depended on what was happening in the other one.¹⁷ Nonetheless, several studies focusing on Laos do exist, for example, Edmund F. Wehrle, Patit Paban Mishra, Kenneth L. Hill and Usha Mahajani have examined US foreign policy in Laos. However, most of these studies are somewhat outdated.¹⁸ Nevertheless, one exception can be distinguished. This exception is a study by Seth Jacobs. He has examined Kennedy's foreign policy towards Laos extensively, and he has discussed how this shaped the American Cold War attitude towards Southeast Asia in general.¹⁹

Even though the just mentioned studies have studied the Lao Civil War and US involvement extensively, they mostly discuss the US perspective of the involvement in the conflict. The research for this thesis will add to the existing literature by incorporating the experience of the Lao Hmong people vis-à-vis US involvement in Laos. Exposing both the American and Hmong sides provides for a more comprehensive overview of the conflict.

Methodology and structure

To answer the research question, this research will use the following corresponding sub-questions: "How did Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy develop?", "How did the Kennedy

¹⁵ Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 22-23; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 200; Campbell Craig, 'Kennedy's International Legacy, Fifty Years On', *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 1371; Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xxi.

¹⁶ For example, in: Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn Blatt Young, *Making sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Mai Elliott, 'RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era' (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010).

¹⁷ Edmund F. Wehrle, "'A Good, Bad Deal': John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962", *Faculty Research & Creative Activity* 38 (1998): 45-46; Patit Paban Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962', *Journal of International Studies* 7 (2011): 113.

¹⁸ Wehrle, "'A Good, Bad Deal': John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962"; Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962'; Kenneth L. Hill, 'President Kennedy and the Neutralization of Laos', *The Review of Politics* 31, no. 3 (1969); Usha Mahajani, 'President Kennedy and United States Policy in Laos, 1961-63', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, No. 2 (1971).

¹⁹ Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 3.

administration act during the Lao Civil War?” and “How did the Hmong act during the Lao Civil War?” To conduct this research, a variety of archival sources will be used.

The first chapter will discuss Kennedy’s Cold War foreign policy, his foreign policy in Southeast Asia and US involvement in the Lao Civil War specifically. Kennedy’s Cold War foreign policy will be examined through a literature review. This chapter will be an extension of the historiographical overview provided in the previous paragraph and elaborate on the most important research that has already been done on this topic. Furthermore, the first chapter will discuss in more detail why and how the research for this thesis is academically relevant.

The second chapter will examine the origin and development of the Lao Civil War, the involvement of the international community in Laos, especially Kennedy’s foreign policy regarding Laos, what his intentions in Laos were and how these worked out in his policy. To investigate Kennedy’s foreign policy regarding Laos, the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) collection by the State Department will be reviewed. This digital archive contains a volume on the Lao Civil War, which provides information about Kennedy’s perceptions and actions regarding Laos.²⁰ Next to that, sources from the online JFK Library will be used to examine Kennedy’s perceptions. After all, this digital archive contains Kennedy’s written speeches and memoranda from within the administration.²¹ Furthermore, the National Security Archive (NSA) will be reviewed. The collection “Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973” is useful for investigating the role of the CIA in Laos during Kennedy’s presidency.²²

The third chapter will look in greater detail into the Lao Hmong people, how they experienced the Lao Civil War and American involvement in their country. For examining the perceptions of the Lao Hmong, the Hmong Oral History Project (HOHP) will be explored. This project contains interviews that have been conducted with Hmong refugees, soldiers and American CIA officers that have worked with the Hmong during the Lao Civil War. The transcripts of the interviews show how the Lao Hmong lived prior to the War, how the War affected their lives and their experiences with American involvement. These interviews provide valuable insights into the events and developments of the War and how they perceived US involvement in their country on a more personal level. However, it is important to note that the interviewees are biased. All interviewed Hmong people received American aid and were given

²⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, Laos Crisis, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1994).

²¹ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Historic Speeches, Oral History Collection and Presidential Papers. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.jfklibrary.org>.

²² National Security Archive (NSA). Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB248/index.htm>.

the opportunity to seek refuge in the US as the War aggravated. Even though they are biased about the American involvement in the War, the interviews still provide valuable insights into the lives of the Hmong in Laos and their experiences during the War.²³

²³ Concordia University, Hmong Studies, Hmong Oral History Project (HOHP), accessed June 12, 2020, https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/hmong-studies_hohp/.

Chapter 1: Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy

This chapter will discuss the existing literature on Kennedy's foreign policy. The first part of this chapter will elaborate on some of the most crucial issues and crises related to the Cold War that Kennedy worked on and had to deal with during his presidency. This part discusses a variety of studies that have argued Kennedy's views and goals regarding American Cold War foreign policy. The second part will more specifically describe these views and intentions regarding Southeast Asia and the studies that have examined this topic. This part will also discuss studies on how Kennedy approached Laos and the Lao Civil War.

Kennedy's Cold War

In the Second World War, the US and the Soviet Union (SU) were allies that fought against a shared enemy, Nazi Germany. As the War came to an end, both nations developed diverging interests and, consequently, their alliance faltered and hopes for post-war cooperation shattered. As their military and political blocs established, the US abandoning its traditional isolationism and the SU imposing their communism in Eastern European areas, the Cold War commenced. When Kennedy came to power in 1961, the Cold War rivals had continued to increase their arsenals of nuclear weapons as well. The US held a significant majority here, but in terms of conventional weaponry and armed forces, the Soviets prevailed. This difference caused a global struggle for influence and power.²⁴ How Kennedy perceived and wanted to deal with this environment in which he took office, remains a topic on which scholars are divided. Whenever Kennedy is being discussed, how his Cold War approach is described ranges from fierce to cautious.

To illustrate, Thomas Paterson has described Kennedy as a fierce Cold Warrior because he strove to win the Cold War and took even more risks than his fierce predecessor Eisenhower to reach this goal.²⁵ By way of contrast, W.R. Smyser has perceived Kennedy to be cautious in his Cold War approach, seeing that Kennedy was worried about Khrushchev's foreign policy, and especially the Soviet threat to Berlin. Khrushchev's communist rhetoric frightened him.²⁶ Because of this feeling, the newly inaugurated President aimed at a new start in American-Soviet relations. In his memorable inauguration speech on January 20, 1961, he articulated his desire to improve cooperation, negotiation and arms limitation to achieve peace. By way of

²⁴ Duncan, *John F. Kennedy: The Spirit of Cold War Liberalism*, 2.

²⁵ Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 7.

²⁶ Smyser, *Kennedy and the Berlin Wall: 'A Hell of a Lot Better than a War,'* 2.

contrast, he advocated American military strength as well. Speaking of both these diverging elements shows his two-fold approach, which set the tone for the rest of his presidency.²⁷

How Kennedy approached Khrushchev and aimed at improving the American-Soviet relationship appears from Kennedy's initiative for an informal summit meeting with the Soviet leader in Vienna at the beginning of June 1961. In an attempt to mediate a Cold War truce, Kennedy wanted to discuss neutralising Laos and achieving a test ban treaty.²⁸ However, for Khrushchev, these items were not at the top of his priority list. He considered it of higher importance to settle the German issue first because the growing power of Western Germany frightened him. Above all, he wanted to end the East German refugee flow to West Germany through West Berlin. For Khrushchev, the continuity of East Germany was essential for preserving the Soviet sphere of influence in the region.²⁹ Kennedy listened carefully to Khrushchev's conceptions, hoping that if he would pay close attention and respect to Khrushchev, something the Eisenhower administration never did, the Soviet leader would soften. These efforts show that Kennedy took a more nuanced approach towards the Cold War and a shift from his predecessor's fiercer policy.³⁰

However, Kennedy did not commence his presidency with a nuanced Cold War approach as his foreign policy initially showed signs of a fierce Cold War approach. As a matter of fact, because of the heightened tensions over Berlin, Kennedy increased his defence spending and strengthened the American position in Europe. Only as the following months passed, he softened his position because he realised a fierce approach would not improve his relationship with Khrushchev. Furthermore, Kennedy considered, Berlin was not worth risking a broader conflict over.³¹

Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy approach not only softened regarding Berlin but also in terms of his approach to Cuba. Indeed, similarly to Berlin, Kennedy faced difficulties in Cuba. After all, in April 1961, Kennedy approved an American intervention in Cuba aimed at

²⁷ JFK Library, Historic Speeches, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961; James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 27-28.

²⁸ FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume VI, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges, eds. Charles S. Sampson and Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 7: Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev, 22 February 1961.

²⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, Laos Crisis, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1994), Document 107: Memorandum of Conversation, 3 June 1961, (Hereafter: FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document); Deborah Welch Larson, 'Kennedy and Khrushchev', *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 4 (2018): 536; Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 162.

³⁰ Naftali, 'Khrushchev and Kennedy,' 532.

³¹ Carter, 'The US Military Response to the 1960-1962 Berlin Crisis'; Husain, 'Covert Action and US Cold War Strategy in Cuba, 1961-62,' 26.

overthrowing Fidel Castro's communist government. However, the intervention was unsuccessful as Kennedy held back American air support during the operation, and Castro's government managed to keep control. Although this event shows that Kennedy became dubious during the intervention, he did choose to go ahead with it in the first place. This decision does not show a cautious Cold War approach, but a continuation of Eisenhower's Cold Warrior way.³² Nonetheless, Kennedy became more careful after the Bay of Pigs failure. He chose not to attempt another Cuban invasion because he did not want to provoke the Soviets. Hence, it seems that Kennedy had become more cautious in his decision-making.³³

In terms of Kennedy's approach to using military means, it is also evident that he was cautious in his decision-making. Kennedy considered that any military action would lead to nuclear war eventually, so he wanted to avoid using military means at all costs. When Khrushchev decided to install missiles in Cuba to threaten the US more directly, Kennedy was rather decisive about the fact that Khrushchev had to remove those missiles. However, he would not have gone so far as to use military means to get Khrushchev to remove them. So, Kennedy was not as fierce as Eisenhower in his Cold War approach.³⁴

Not only did Kennedy want to avoid using military means at all costs, but John Lewis Gaddis has argued that "The Kennedy administration had entered office in 1961 determined to rationalise the conduct of nuclear war."³⁵ Besides, Kennedy believed that Eisenhower had not put enough effort into defence and arms control. Although this seems paradoxical, for Kennedy, this was not the case. He considered that arms control was only possible through military strength, and both were crucial to security.³⁶ In stark contrast to this perception, Francis Gavin has argued that the predominant conception of the Kennedy administration changing US nuclear strategy completely for the rest of the Cold War in a "flexible response" strategy with a conventional force build-up, is largely untrue. He claims that the Kennedy administration, and later the Johnson administration, did not aim at a conventional force build-up and did not attempt to create more flexible strategic nuclear options. In this area, Kennedy and Johnson had

³² David M. Barrett, 'The Bay of Pigs Fiasco and the Kennedy Administration's Off-the-Record Briefings for Journalists', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21, no. 2 (2019): 3; See, 'An Uneasy Truce: John F. Kennedy and Soviet-American Détente, 1963,' 163.

³³ Husain, 'Covert Action and US Cold War Strategy in Cuba, 1961-62,' 26, 38.

³⁴ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, 535-536, 568; Garthoff, *A Journey Through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence*, 186.

³⁵ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, 74.

³⁶ Philip Nash, 'Bear Any Burden? John F. Kennedy and the Nuclear Weapons', *Cold War Statesman Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945* (November 2004): 5.

more in common with Eisenhower than is often presented. This argument presents a different conception in comparison to the studies that are analysed above.³⁷

Regardless of how Kennedy perceived military means, in terms of military strength, the Kennedy administration had increased American strategic capabilities in any case. America's military strength by mid-1964 was even higher than what the Eisenhower administration had planned.³⁸ According to Thomas Paterson, Kennedy seemed to be more enchanted with military instead of diplomatic means, because defence expenses had increased with 13 per cent and counterinsurgency training and warfare had sped up during the Kennedy years. Besides, during his presidency, Kennedy used armed forces as a political tool more than any other post-war President. This argument also demonstrates that Kennedy might have been fiercer in his Cold War policy-making than presented in the literature discussed earlier.³⁹

In terms of arms control, Kennedy had aimed for a nuclear test ban since the beginning of his presidency. Nevertheless, in his first year in office, he was unable to strengthen American arms control policy. Several scholars have argued that both the domestic and foreign policy environments did not allow successful test ban negotiations. In particular, Kennedy was worried that a test ban treaty would result in adverse domestic political consequences and he was afraid to seem soft in the upcoming congressional elections of the fall of 1962.⁴⁰

However, various scholars have also argued that this attitude changed in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy's reputation changed in the sense that he had shown his strength in his dealing with this crisis and how he stood up to the Soviets. Hence, the Cuban Missile Crisis had provided Kennedy with an opportunity for active leadership, so much so that this crisis can be considered as a significant turning point of the Cold War. In fact, after the crisis in Cuba, a different kind of Cold War emerged, a Cold War with a prospect of long-lasting peace. Above all, Kennedy did not seem to be a fierce Cold Warrior at all anymore. Instead, he attempted to change the American-Soviet relationship and started seeking cooperation rather than confrontation.⁴¹

As the test ban treaty negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev resumed soon after the Cuban Missile Crisis, this crisis can be considered as the reason for this resumption

³⁷ Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age*, 4.

³⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, 217.

³⁹ Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 3.

⁴⁰ Wenger and Gerber, 'John F. Kennedy and the Limited Test Ban Treaty: A Case Study of Presidential Leadership,' 480; Friedman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War*, 274-275.

⁴¹ Wenger and Gerber, 'John F. Kennedy and the Limited Test Ban Treaty: A Case Study of Presidential Leadership,' 480; See, 'An Uneasy Truce: John F. Kennedy and Soviet-American Détente, 1963,' 162; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, 261.

because now they realised the dangers of a stalemated Cold War were too risky to endure in the nuclear age.⁴² Another reason for the resumption of the negotiations can also be Kennedy's commencement speech at the American University in the spring of 1963. He focused this address on attaining peaceful coexistence and easing the Cold War.⁴³ In turn, Khrushchev was seriously influenced by Kennedy's speech and, therefore, was also willing to resume the negotiations to achieve a test ban treaty.⁴⁴

Whatever the incentives were, the test ban treaty was a first step towards building trust between the two superpowers. Although they did not expect that the treaty would enable them to end the Cold War, it certainly was an opportunity to achieve further agreement.⁴⁵ The test ban treaty, signed less than two months before Kennedy died in November 1963, was a historic and great victory for Kennedy. The treaty was widely perceived as the beginning of a shift from a dangerous rivalry towards a more peaceful and harmonious future.⁴⁶ In a way, the Cold War ended in mid-1963 since both sides now acknowledged the legitimacy of the other. Although the progress during Kennedy's presidency was promising, it was not sufficient to end the Cold War altogether. Most significant statesmen and politicians at the time did not consider this as the case at any rate.⁴⁷

The same was true for Kennedy. Melvyn Leffler has argued that Kennedy did not perceive the Cold War to be over soon in 1963. Kennedy was willing to compete with the communists if the communist policy would change. However, Kennedy did not expect this to happen, because to realise this peaceful coexistence, the Soviets had to leave their expansionism and stop their support for national liberation wars. As he explained in his State of Union Address on January 14, 1963: "a moment of pause is not a promise of peace", for Kennedy, the end of the Cold War was not in sight yet.⁴⁸

All in all, the crises Kennedy had to deal with during his presidency shaped the development of his Cold War foreign policy. Although Kennedy aimed at improving American-Soviet relations, the crises in Berlin and Cuba hindered this intention. These crises also made

⁴² Wenger and Gerber, 'John F. Kennedy and the Limited Test Ban Treaty: A Case Study of Presidential Leadership,' 470-471.

⁴³ JFK Library, Historic Speeches, American University Commencement Address, 10 June 1963.

⁴⁴ Gregory M. Tomlin, *Murrow's Cold War: Public Diplomacy for the Kennedy Administration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 185-186.

⁴⁵ See, 'An Uneasy Truce: John F. Kennedy and Soviet-American Détente, 1963,' 184.

⁴⁶ FRUS, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges, Document 118: Telegram From the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, 10 October 1963; Duncan, *John F. Kennedy: The Spirit of Cold War Liberalism*, 109.

⁴⁷ Frederik Logevall and Campbell Craig, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity*, 197, 214.

⁴⁸ Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, 175; Quote in JFK Library, State of the Union message, reading copy, 14 January 1963.

him more cautious in his decision-making because he did not want to provoke Khrushchev. Furthermore, even though the Kennedy administration had increased American strategic capabilities throughout its years in office, Kennedy perceived the use of military means to be a last resort. This conception shows that he was not the fierce Cold Warrior Eisenhower had been. That Kennedy was not a fierce Cold Warrior, is also reflected in his aim and realisation of a nuclear test ban treaty. It was a first step towards building trust between the two superpowers and the beginning of a shift from a dangerous rivalry towards a more peaceful and harmonious future. This demonstrates how, as Kennedy's presidency evolved, he started seeking cooperation rather than confrontation with the Soviets. Although this paragraph has provided an overall view of Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy, it has not mentioned anything specific regarding Southeast Asia and Laos. Hence, the next paragraph will elaborate on these areas.

Kennedy in Southeast Asia

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the Kennedy administration can be considered as a turning point in the Cold War. After all, it never seemed so critical again after the early 1960s. According to Lawrence Freedman, Kennedy had two priorities during his presidency. The first one, discussed in the previous paragraph, improving East-West relations, proved to be successful. Kennedy managed to turn tensions over Berlin into a nuclear test ban treaty. The second priority, countering communists in the Third World in a safe and effective way, will be discussed in the remaining part of the chapter.⁴⁹

Since the end of the Second World War, the US has intervened extensively in countries that had recently gained independence throughout the "Third World". The Cold War anti-communist agenda stood central in these interventions. After 1945, the US had developed unique interventionist means and had become the superior capitalist power, in economic and military terms, but also ideologically. The US often intervened in the "Third World", because it was capable of doing so and it felt responsible for running the global capitalist system.⁵⁰

Counterinsurgency missions arose alongside these interventions. They became increasingly significant in the post-Second World War era. The US felt more and more obliged to use military power into foreign countries and their internal affairs through counterinsurgency missions in order to combat the emerging communist threat. Counterinsurgency can be defined as the economic, social, political and military actions a government takes to suppress insurgent,

⁴⁹ Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, xii.

⁵⁰ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110-111.

revolutionary and resistance movements. The role of the military in counterinsurgency lies in combatting these movements and pacification actions to establish or preserve the authority of the government in areas that are openly hostile or possibly become so.⁵¹

The Soviets under Khrushchev approached the “Third World” countries differently in comparison to the Americans. They viewed the post-colonial countries as allies of the proletariat and, therefore, of the SU as the first proletarian state. Throughout the 1960s, the Soviets extended their efforts to form and strengthen relationships with more and more national liberation movements and “Third World” countries. Both the Americans and the Soviets perceived the colonial and post-colonial world as a zero-sum game arena. This meant that even the smallest gain in influence or presence for one bloc was instantly recognised as an equal loss of influence or presence for the other bloc.⁵²

Paterson has also discussed how Kennedy perceived the zero-sum nature of the Cold War as well as the strength of the domino theory in Southeast Asia. The domino theory was launched during the Eisenhower administration, and it reflected the conception that the fall of one Southeast Asian country to communism would quickly lead to other Southeast Asian countries falling to communist control. If Laos would be lost to communist control, neighbouring countries South Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Burma would collapse as well. Years later, Kennedy reaffirmed this conception and, therefore, the importance of eliminating the communist threat in Southeast Asia.⁵³ According to Paterson, Kennedy aspired global American supremacy and intended to protect and extend American power through hegemonic policies, protecting its own interests against “Third World” nationalists, and the containment of communism.⁵⁴

Likewise, John Lewis Gaddis had expressed the importance of protecting American interests and American security for Kennedy. He perceived it to be in the American interest that diversity in the world would be protected and preserved to prevent one power or a combination of powers to be able to threaten American security. Accordingly, supporting the independence of countries was an important part of Kennedy’s foreign policy to prevent one bloc from obtaining sufficient power to overcome the US eventually. For Kennedy, it was in the American

⁵¹ Andrew J. Birtle, *US army counterinsurgency and contingency operations doctrine 1942-1976* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2006): 3-4.

⁵² Roger E. Kanet, ‘The Superpower Quest for Empire: The Cold War and the Soviet Support for “Wars of National Liberation”’, *Cold War History* 6, no. 3 (2006): 335-336.

⁵³ Paterson, *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 11; Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997); 161-162.

⁵⁴ Paterson, *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 22-23.

interest to balance power in the world, not to transform it entirely. Nationalism did not pose a threat to US institutions if it mirrored the self-determination principle.⁵⁵

Kennedy believed that the US had to end its conventional emphasis on military agreements and formal alliances in the “Third World”. He wanted to embrace a more flexible attitude toward non-alignment and development aid instead.⁵⁶ Although the Kennedy administration perceived South-East Asia (Laos and Vietnam in particular) as a fundamental element in its broader policy of undertaking a more effective and powerful Cold War in the “Third World”, it also believed that only giving money and weapons to any possible rightist was not the best option. Creating sustainable pro-western regimes was far more durable and reasonable to prevent communist expansion.⁵⁷

According to Robert Rakove, Kennedy was convinced that the battlefields in the “Third World” would decide the course and outcome of the Cold War. Because he felt that the previous Eisenhower administration had paid insufficient attention to waging the Cold War in this new area, the Kennedy administration endorsed a variety of new programs. For example, Kennedy approved the establishment of counterinsurgency programs to protect poor, friendly countries against communist rebellions. He also developed the Peace Corps which sent young and eager volunteers across the world to brighten the US image as an advocator of “Third World” development.⁵⁸ Kennedy perceived the Peace Corps as a powerful way to oppose Soviet claims of American selfishness and interest in exploitation and profit. It was established to stimulate newly independent nations to look up to the US as their model instead of the SU.⁵⁹

The Lao Civil War was the first foreign policy crisis Kennedy faced as President. The War had started little over a year before he took office, in December 1959, when General Phoumi Nosavan, member of the military-dominated RLG arrested the communist Pathet Lao representatives of the National Assembly. Soon, Laos became tangled in a Civil War.⁶⁰ In the existing literature, according to Edmund Wehrle, the events in Laos are often overshadowed by other Cold War-related crises, especially by the Vietnam War. However, Laos took most of Kennedy’s time during his first two years in the White House, more than Vietnam. Moreover,

⁵⁵ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, 200.

⁵⁶ Paul M. McGarr, *The Cold War in South Asia: Britain, the United States and the Indian Subcontinent 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 89.

⁵⁷ Craig, ‘Kennedy’s International Legacy, Fifty Years On,’ 1371.

⁵⁸ Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, xxi.

⁵⁹ Duncan, *John F. Kennedy: The Spirit of Cold War Liberalism*, 111.

⁶⁰ Mishra, ‘From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,’ 105.

the role of Laos was critical in determining the US stance in Vietnam and the other way around.⁶¹

After all, the intensification of the Vietnam War deepened the conflict in Laos. Consequently, the US, as well as both Vietnams, became intensely involved in the events in Laos. As the issues in Laos remained unsettled, the country was in fact balkanised. Although it seemed like a solution was within reach after the neutralisation of Laos in 1962, which will be discussed in the next chapter, this depended on what happened in Vietnam. The connection between Laos and the Vietnam War caused the solution for the Lao War to be dependent on the outcome of the Vietnam War.⁶²

The reasoning behind Kennedy's actions in Laos is viewed from many different perspectives among scholars. In Laos, Kennedy aimed at forming a neutral government that would consist of pro-American components as well as communist Pathet Lao representatives. Despite opposition from many of his advisors, Kennedy pursued preventing escalation and managed to negotiate a settlement.⁶³ After all, according to Kenneth Hill, he wanted to end American-Soviet Cold War hostilities. Kennedy felt that this was possible if a satisfactory solution in Laos would be reached. Since both superpowers did not have significant national interests there, he considered Laos to be a good issue to start with. Moreover, he did not want to start his presidency by provoking a confrontation with the Soviets, and he was eager to solve the problems in Laos politically, not militarily. Although Kennedy did not want US forces on the ground in Laos, he wanted to find a way to keep some sort of US presence there.⁶⁴

Eisenhower had already considered this a few years earlier as well. In 1955, his administration had set up the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) to maintain US presence in Laos. This military assistance program was created because the Geneva Agreements from 1954 had forbidden US military presence in Laos. Kennedy continued counterinsurgency practices in the shape of secret training programs for Lao soldiers and a growing role for the American Special Forces as combat advisor.⁶⁵ He recognised the overall significance of

⁶¹ Edmund F. Wehrle, 'A Good, Bad Deal': John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962,' *Faculty Research & Creative Activity* Vol. 38 (1998): 349-350; Bradley and Blatt Young, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, 45-46.

⁶² Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,' 113.

⁶³ Wehrle, "'A Good, Bad Deal': John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962,' 349-350.

⁶⁴ Hill, 'President Kennedy and the Neutralization of Laos,' 354-355.

⁶⁵ Michael McClintock, 'Toward a New Counterinsurgency: Philippines, Laos, and Vietnam', in *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940-1990*, 2002, <https://www.statecraft.org/chapter4.html>.

counterinsurgency missions as part of the Cold War and, therefore, he perceived it as a foreign policy priority.⁶⁶

The Kennedy administration also regarded a communist victory in Laos to be humiliating for the US. Even though Washington advocated freedom and independence for the Lao government and people as its first concerns, it did not want to lose either. Moreover, if Laos faced the threat of a Pathet Lao victory, Kennedy did not oppose US military intervention. So, an intervention was not ruled out if the communist threat would get real.⁶⁷

Despite these considerations within Laos, other Cold War issues also played a role in Kennedy's decision-making. After all, Kennedy perceived the Cold War system as interdependent. Therefore, he considered the concurrent crises in Berlin and Cuba, which were elaborated on in the previous part of this chapter, in his policy-making regarding Laos as well. In relation to Berlin, Kennedy more and more felt the need to preserve the Cold War balance in Berlin as the Soviets kept challenging Western access to Berlin after they built the Berlin Wall.⁶⁸ Next to Berlin, because of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy was more cautious with intervening militarily in Laos since the communists were by far the dominant military force in the country. While the Eisenhower administration had supported the right-wing government against both the neutralists and the communists, Kennedy aimed at a more cautious policy through neutralising Laos. In contrast to Eisenhower, Kennedy considered the neutralists an essential ally against the communist insurgency in the country.⁶⁹

In April 1961, the US agreed with the SU to neutralise Laos and thereby to cut it out from the Cold War arena. It can be argued that this shows how the previous strong anti-communist policy build-up of the Eisenhower administration had failed because of this neutralisation.⁷⁰ It can also be argued that Kennedy considered neutrality in Laos to be the best solution because he thought sending American troops directly to Laos to intervene would only create more problems. However, what he chose to do instead was stationing American troops in Laos' neighbour, Thailand, as a signal to the communists that the US would attempt to prevent Laos from falling to communism domination.⁷¹

In general, studies about Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy or the Vietnam War often refer to the Lao Civil War. However, it is not often examined on its own. Nevertheless, one

⁶⁶ Jeffrey H. Michaels, 'Managing Global Counterinsurgency: The Special Group (CI) 1962-1966', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 38-39.

⁶⁷ Mahajani, 'President Kennedy and United States Policy in Laos, 1961-63', 89, 91.

⁶⁸ Husain, 'Covert Action and US Cold War Strategy in Cuba, 1961-62,' 26.

⁶⁹ Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson and the Nonaligned World*, 214.

⁷⁰ Elliott, 'RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,' 544-545.

⁷¹ Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976*, 200.

exception can be found. Seth Jacobs has studied Kennedy's foreign policy towards Laos, and he has argued that this shaped the American Cold War attitude regarding Southeast Asia in *The Universe Unravelling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*. The research for this thesis will examine similar aspects in comparison to Jacob's study. However, the aspect that makes it distinct, and, therefore, relevant to examine, is the focus on the perceptions of the Lao Hmong people regarding the War in their country. They played an important role in the combat against the communists and worked together with the CIA to diminish their presence.⁷²

In conclusion, Kennedy's foreign policy regarding Southeast Asia has shown continuities and deviations compared to his predecessor Eisenhower. Similarly to him, Kennedy acknowledged the strength of the domino theory and, therefore, understood the importance of eliminating the communist threat in Southeast Asia. However, Kennedy also wanted to depart from Eisenhower's policy in the sense that he wanted to end the conventional emphasis on military agreements and formal alliances. Instead, Kennedy aimed at a more flexible attitude towards non-alignment and development aid. How Kennedy perceived and acted in Laos, specifically, will be examined in the next chapter.

⁷² Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 3.

Chapter 2: The Lao Civil War and US involvement under Kennedy

This chapter will examine the Lao Civil War and Kennedy's decision-making regarding it. The first part of this chapter will discuss what preceded the conflict and how Kennedy's predecessor Eisenhower perceived Laos in general. After that, the early period of Kennedy's presidency and the development of his stance regarding Laos will be elaborated on. Subsequently, how the Lao coalition government came about will be examined. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the breaking down of this coalition government within a year of its establishment and how Kennedy responded to it.

Leading up to the Lao Civil War

Western involvement in Laos stemmed from the late nineteenth century when the French colonised Laos in 1893. From this year, Laos became part of Indochina, as the French called their area of colonial control in Southeast Asia. Although the Japanese conquered Laos during the Second World War, the French did not let go of their colony easily. After the War, and after the Japanese surrender, they attempted to re-conquer Laos. This attempt led to the First Indochina War (1946-1954) as the Lao nationalists did not give in and kept fighting the French for full independence of their country.⁷³

The First Indochina War came to an end during the Geneva Conference of 1954 when the French agreed to give up their colonial claim to Laos. The Soviet, American, British and French foreign ministers had decided to hold this conference earlier that year when they had gathered in Berlin to discuss the German question. Next to these countries, China, Laos, Cambodia, South Vietnam and North Vietnam took part in the conference.⁷⁴ The Geneva Conference very much arose from the well-organised "peace offensive" launched by the communists after Stalin's death a year earlier.⁷⁵ The Soviets now wanted a peaceful resolution for Indochina.⁷⁶ Moreover, they also wanted to prevent the Americans from establishing a

⁷³ Martin Stuart-Fox, 'The French in Laos, 1887-1945', *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1995): 111, 139; Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,' 104.

⁷⁴ Tao Wang, 'Neutralizing Indochina: The 1954 Geneva Conference and China's Efforts to Isolate the United States', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017): 4.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Roberts, 'A Chance for Peace? The Soviet Campaign to End the Cold War, 1953-1955', *Cold War International History Project*, no. 57 (2011).

⁷⁶ Wang, 'Neutralizing Indochina: The 1954 Geneva Conference and China's Efforts to Isolate the United States,' 5.

military organisation in Southeast Asia, which they thought would happen if they did not actively disrupt American chances to intervene in the region.⁷⁷

On July 20, 1954, the participating countries decided, as the Soviets wanted, that all foreign armed forces had to end all hostilities in Laos, including all air and naval forces, ground personnel and units.⁷⁸ It was agreed upon that the French and Viet Minh, an organisation that led the fight of Vietnamese independence from French dominance, had to leave Laos. Furthermore, the communist Pathet Lao forces would be integrated into the government army.⁷⁹ Soon, the agreements set out in Geneva proved to be challenging to enforce. After all, the Lao domestic politics were dynastic and traditional, not defined by the global Cold War struggle between the major powers and the plain ideological framework they were trying to enforce. Within this framework, the question was whether Laos would side with the communist or the anti-communist faction.⁸⁰

Right after the Geneva Conference, a profound struggle arose between the Pathet Lao and the RLG. Even though the Geneva agreement had prohibited the Americans from supporting the RLG, the Eisenhower administration did not accept Lao neutralisation and did not want to abandon the country and hand it over to the communists. Therefore, the US had not signed the Geneva agreement. However, Eisenhower had promised not to violate them for public relations reasons and, consequently, did not send any American armed forces to combat the Pathet Lao.⁸¹

Nonetheless, instead of sending armed forces, Eisenhower sent money. The RLG received hundreds of millions of dollars through the PEO, an aid organisation set up in 1955. The PEO officially was a private company, where US military staff worked without uniforms and managed the allocation of military equipment to the Royal Lao Army (RLA).⁸² By Eisenhower's second term, the US had spent 40 million dollars on Laos annually, of which 80 per cent went to the RLA. Despite this money supply and, therefore, more aeroplanes, guns and tanks, they lost almost every battle from the Pathet Lao. According to CIA operatives in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, the individual Royal Lao soldiers simply did not have enough

⁷⁷ Zhai Qiang, 'China and the Geneva Conference of 1954', *The China Quarterly*, no. 129 (1992), 109-110.

⁷⁸ United Nations, peacemaker, Geneva Agreement, Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam, 20 July 1954, accessed June 12, 2020, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN_540720_GenevaAgreements.pdf.

⁷⁹ 'Viet Minh', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 13 April 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Minh>.

⁸⁰ Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, 293.

⁸¹ Wehrle, "'A Good, Bad Deal': John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962," 352; Bradley and Blatt Young, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, 48-49; Qiang, 'China and the Geneva Conference of 1954,' 122.

⁸² Seth Jacobs, 'Laos', in *A Companion to John F. Kennedy*, ed. Marc J. Selverstone (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 251.

willpower to defeat the Pathet Lao. They were unable to turn the Royal Lao soldiers into Cold Warriors, since they had an enduring tradition of little affinity with bloodshed and were, therefore, not eager to fight.⁸³ These efforts by the Eisenhower administration show how Laos had turned into a Cold War puppet already.⁸⁴ After all, the US got deeply involved in Laos and started making efforts to deploy the country as an anti-communist fortress on China's and Vietnam's borders.⁸⁵

While the Eisenhower administration supported the RLG in the intense combat against the Pathet Lao, neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma became prime minister in 1956. In 1957, he created a neutral government to prosper peace, together with his half-brother and Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong. However, the Eisenhower administration rejected this development because it perceived neutrality as a compromise with the wrong side. By the time the Kennedy administration took office, the actions of the right-wing leader of the RLA, General Phoumi had caused the neutralist forces to side even more with the Pathet Lao. In turn, this also triggered more support from Hanoi and further Soviet intervention.⁸⁶ The situation became even worse in December 1959, when General Phoumi, as the leader of the military-dominated government, arrested the Pathet Lao representatives of the National Assembly. After this, Laos slowly became entangled in a Civil War.⁸⁷ The above shows that the Geneva Conference of 1954 had not been the ultimate solution for the problems in Laos.

Following multiple coups and counter coups, Souvanna's neutralist government was overthrown at the end of 1960. Souvanna fled to neighbouring country Cambodia. The neutralist military organisation, led by Captain Kong Lae, had merged with the Pathet Lao army. General Phoumi's forces, with American aid, had moved towards Vientiane and established a right-wing government with a new premier, Boun Oum, and General Phoumi as the true strongman in the role of Vice President and Minister of Defence. Political polarisation went hand in hand with the outbreak of the Civil War.⁸⁸

Although Phoumi's forces had captured Vientiane, or what was left of it, their victory had much greater costs than benefits. The struggle for the city had not solved any issues, and

⁸³ Bradley and Blatt Young, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, 48-49.

⁸⁴ Wehrle, "A Good, Bad Deal": John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962,' 352.

⁸⁵ Elliott, 'RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,' 542.

⁸⁶ Wehrle, "A Good, Bad Deal": John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962,' 352; Noam Kochavi, 'Limited Accommodation, Perpetuated Conflict: Kennedy, China, and the Laos Crisis, 1961-1963', *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 1 (2002): 103-104.

⁸⁷ Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,' 105.

⁸⁸ Mahajani, 'President Kennedy and United States Policy in Laos, 1961-63,' 87.

the communist influence in Laos was larger than in 1954. Furthermore, the neutralists and the Pathet Lao combined their forces in northern Laos and established a base where they connected with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The combined forces transformed the Plain of Jars, Lao's main agricultural area, into an army base camp. Because of these developments, the Americans also faced issues with their oldest European allies, France and Britain. They opposed Washington's pro-Phoumi position and publicly supported the exiled Souvanna instead.⁸⁹ This illustrates how the Americans perceived the communist threat and the problems in Laos differently compared to its allies.

The Pathet Lao enjoyed strong support from communist North Vietnam. They did not only support the Pathet Lao in solidarity for a fellow communist movement but more importantly, because they wanted to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This trail allowed the NVA to channel troops and material to their enemy South Vietnam. The NVA made great advances since the RLA was incapable of countering them despite the training and financial support they received from the US. However, not all Lao forces were ineffective. The Lao Hmong tribesmen were effective indeed, and many of them lived around the Plain of Jars. They fought like guerrillas, and the CIA trained and sustained them.⁹⁰ According to one of the Hmong fighters, the main reason the CIA trained and sustained them was that they were not only good fighters but also reliable fighters. He argues that the Americans collaborated with them because "as they looked into Hmong history, they saw that the Hmong were upright and just people in their work."⁹¹

All in all, the Geneva Conference of 1954 proved unable to put an end to the hostilities in Laos. The Eisenhower administration had not accepted a neutral Lao government and supported the RLG in their continuing battle against the communist Pathet Lao. By the time Kennedy took office, Laos had become entangled in a deep Civil War, with the RLG, Pathet Lao and neutralist forces continuously fighting for power. How Kennedy dealt with this struggle will be elaborated on in the next paragraph.

Kennedy's formulation of Lao policy: leading up to the decision to neutralise

In early 1961, the Pathet Lao was receiving enormous foreign support, not only from North Vietnam but also from the Soviets in the shape of airlifts of supplies to northern Laos. This support enabled the communists to gain much Lao territory. In the US, around the same time,

⁸⁹ Jacobs, 'Laos,' 255.

⁹⁰ Paul et al., 'Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies,' 149.

⁹¹ Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Colonel Gao Moua.

Eisenhower was preparing to hand over the American presidency to Kennedy. As discussed in the previous paragraph, Eisenhower had always been eager to prevent Laos from falling to the communists and, therefore, urged Kennedy to start preparing for a military intervention soon.⁹² After all, according to Eisenhower, Laos was the “cork in the bottle” which meant that if Laos would fall to the communists, Thailand and the Philippines would follow. This perception shows his continued belief in the domino theory and how he aimed to pass this on to Kennedy as well.⁹³ Despite Eisenhower’s concerns, American intervention should also be the last resort and only executed when Laos desperately needed to be saved in order to keep the dominos from falling.⁹⁴

In his first weeks in office, Kennedy was indeed eager to prevent direct involvement in Laos as much as possible.⁹⁵ He was also concerned about the weak condition the country was in and, therefore, his administration aimed at facilitating the RLG to restore firm political control. Kennedy considered this as essential to maintaining a strong position against the Pathet Lao and vis-à-vis the Soviets. After all, Kennedy perceived the issues in Laos as part of the overarching confrontation with the Soviet bloc.⁹⁶ This was not easy since America’s Lao allies clashed and the neutralists were cooperating with the communists more and more. Their cooperation enabled them to make steady military advances.⁹⁷

At the beginning of February, Kennedy decided that he would actively start seeking a diplomatic resolution. He considered that a diplomatic path would be important to maintain good relations with America’s allies France and Britain. They were prepared to go much further than the US to achieve neutrality in Laos and would also allow the Pathet Lao to take part in a neutral government to prevent risking a conflict.⁹⁸ Besides pursuing a diplomatic solution with a neutral government in Laos, Kennedy continued the military efforts as well. In March 1961, Washington still supported and encouraged Phoumi’s attacks with the perspective on

⁹² Wehrle, “‘A Good, Bad Deal’: John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962,” 353; Geoffrey D.T. Shaw, ‘Laotian “Neutrality”: A Fresh Look at a Key Vietnam War Blunder’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 13, no. 1 (2002), 28.

⁹³ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 7: Notes of Conversation Between President-Elect Kennedy and President Eisenhower, 19 January 1961.

⁹⁴ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 8: Memorandum for the Record, 19 January 1961.

⁹⁵ Nigel J. Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 31.

⁹⁶ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 10: Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of Defense of International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense McNamara, 23 January 1961.

⁹⁷ Elliott, ‘RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,’ 544; Paterson, *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, 228.

⁹⁸ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 13: Memorandum of Conversation, 3 February 1961; FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 15: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 10 February 1961; FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 16: Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to President Kennedy, 14 February 1961.

strengthening their bargaining position whenever a neutral government would be negotiated on in the future.⁹⁹ However, this support and encouragement did not yield Washington's desired result. Kennedy became highly frustrated about the low commitment of the RLA. Nevertheless, he would still decide to intervene and, additionally, support Phoumi if he was truly reaching the brink of defeat.¹⁰⁰

Next to Kennedy's considerations, international pressure also played a role in his decision-making. After all, the international demand for an International Control Commission (ICC) conference was growing.¹⁰¹ This international body had been given the task of overseeing the implementation of the Geneva Agreements that were made in 1954.¹⁰² Because of this pressure, it became inevitable for Washington to start negotiations with the Soviets for a solution in Laos. The Soviets believed Souvanna was the most capable neutral leader, and so did America's allies. This perception gained more and more advocates within the Kennedy administration as well. Kennedy's advisors convinced him that a neutral government was worth striving for and that the costs of continued involvement were possibly getting too high. This illustrates that a neutral government under Souvanna would receive considerable support, inside and outside the US, which was an important aspect that Kennedy kept in mind during his decision-making.¹⁰³

So, Kennedy's decision-making regarding Laos depended on multiple factors. Because of these factors, he was less in favour of military intervention compared to Eisenhower. Kennedy's administration agreed that "such a conflict would be unjustified, even if the loss of Laos must be accepted." Although Kennedy decided to install US forces in neighbouring countries Thailand and South Vietnam, these were not meant to start a war and achieve a communist surrender. However, they were meant to strengthen their bargaining position. This shows that Kennedy was not eager to fight in Laos.¹⁰⁴

Despite these efforts to strengthen America's bargaining position, as discussed before, the deteriorating military position of the RLG in the first months of 1961 was not conducive to this bargaining position. Meanwhile, the Pathet Lao were also making steady advances. The

⁹⁹ JFK Library, Laos: Security, March 1961: 1-10, Memorandum for the President From Walter Rostow: Evolution of Our Policy in Laos, 9 March 1961.

¹⁰⁰ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 276.

¹⁰¹ JFK Library, Laos: Security, March 1961: 1-10, Memorandum for the President From Walter Rostow: Evolution of Our Policy in Laos, 9 March 1961.

¹⁰² John F. Czyzak and Carl F. Salans, 'The International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question and the Geneva Agreements of 1962', *The American Journal of International Law* 57, no. 2 (April 1963): 302.

¹⁰³ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 47: Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Kennedy, 1 April 1961; Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, 299.

¹⁰⁴ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 62: Memorandum of Meeting With President Kennedy, 26 April 1961; Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 282.

White House eventually agreed to hold an international conference whenever the hostilities would be ceased, and the Pathet Lao would stop these advances. However, while seeking a diplomatic and peaceful solution, Kennedy was still prepared to do what would be necessary to preserve the independence of Laos.¹⁰⁵

This perception changed at the end of April 1961. During a meeting with his advisors on April 27, Kennedy decided that military intervention in Laos was ruled out, whatever might happen. The meeting was crucial and a turning point in American policy towards Laos.¹⁰⁶ Whatever effects it might have on the American position in Southeast Asia, Kennedy announced that “we should not introduce US forces into Laos.” This shows how the perceptions regarding the domino theory were somewhat set aside. Although Kennedy decided to rule out military intervention, this change was highly confidential and would not be communicated to the outside world. After all, Kennedy still wanted to keep the threat of military intervention alive. Although he did not want to intervene at all anymore, the possible threat of intervening was the only leverage Washington had. According to Kennedy, their position would weaken if the other side sensed that Washington had taken the decision not to intervene.¹⁰⁷

Because of Kennedy’s decision not to militarily intervene in Laos, whatever might happen, it seems like Kennedy had departed from Eisenhower’s Cold Warrior attitude. Even though it seems like he had softened his position regarding Laos, nothing was further from the truth when looking at his policy in Vietnam. After all, as discussed before, Kennedy did increase the American presence in South Vietnam. Ever since Kennedy became President, halting communist advances, in the shape of the counterinsurgency policy, was an integral part of the administration’s foreign policy. However, this policy was mostly focused on Vietnam because the military prospects seemed brighter here than in Laos.¹⁰⁸ So, he was just as eager as Eisenhower to halt communism. However, he believed that their chances to reach this were higher in Vietnam than in Laos. Kennedy, therefore, decided that if the Americans had to fight in Southeast Asia at some point, they would fight in South Vietnam, not in Laos. Most Lao people would only be frustrated (except the Hmong because they did not like communists as will be elaborated on in the next chapter) if the Americans would fight against communism in

¹⁰⁵ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 38: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 21 March 1961.

¹⁰⁶ JFK Library, Oral History Interview, U. Alexis Johnson, Recorded Interview By William Brubeck, 7 November 1964.

¹⁰⁷ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 65: Telegram From the Department of State to Secretary of State Rusk, at Ankara, 27 April 1961; Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 265.

¹⁰⁸ Wehrle, ““A Good, Bad Deal”: John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962,” 354.

their country. This approach, not the eagerness to soften Cold War tensions, caused Kennedy to strive for a neutral Lao government ultimately.¹⁰⁹

In conclusion, when Kennedy just took office, he was eager to prevent direct involvement in Laos. As he made efforts to reach a diplomatic resolution, however, he continued military efforts as well. Although he did not want to fight in Laos, he was still prepared to do whatever necessary to preserve Lao independence. This changed in April 1961. Now, the Kennedy administration had ruled out a possible intervention all the same, but the threat of military intervention would be kept alive. After all, the possibility of intervening was the only pressure medium Washington had.

The second Geneva Conference

As soon as the Kennedy administration had ruled out military involvement in Laos in April 1961, Washington agreed with Moscow to relieve the situation by a ceasefire and organise an international conference to neutralise Laos once again. To make this happen, the ICC was going to be reconvened in Geneva to end the hostilities in Laos.¹¹⁰ Kennedy now used intervention as a pressure medium, despite his decision not to intervene, and urged the Soviets that the US would not stand by and watch if Laos would collapse and the communists would take over.¹¹¹

Kennedy's strong words towards the Soviets had much to do with another crisis around the same time in Cuba. After all, in mid-April, the young President's prestige was damaged because of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Here, Kennedy had been unable to overthrow a communist government which cost him dearly. The failed invasion had worsened Kennedy's relationship with Khrushchev and, additionally, deteriorated the Cold War tensions. This also influenced his stance in Laos. Since Kennedy did not want to appear weak here, he used those strong words towards the Soviets. Because Kennedy perceived the Cold War international system to be interdependent, the above can be an indication of another reason that led Kennedy to decide that he would not militarily intervene in Laos. In any case, he just did not want to take the risk of another failed attempt of overthrowing a government, and he certainly wanted to prevent another international fiasco from happening.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 265, 299; Gregory Alan Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam: A Study in Rhetorical Adaptation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 94.

¹¹⁰ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 64: Telegram From the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, 27 April 1961; Elliott, 'RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,' 544.

¹¹¹ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 75: Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Depute Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric) to President Kennedy, 2 May 1961.

¹¹² NSA, *Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*, 48; Kochavi, 'Limited Accommodation, Perpetuated Conflict: Kennedy, China, and the Laos Crisis, 1961-1963,' 108.

On May 12, a week after the British and the Soviets had proposed a ceasefire, the international conference on Laos started in Geneva. The goal was to put an end to the fighting in Laos and, in the meantime, observe a ceasefire. Hanoi, Beijing and the RLG instantly supported this statement, but the Pathet Lao and the neutralists did not respond quickly. They kept fighting as both sides tried to improve their bargaining positions. This came to an end when the Pathet Lao-neutralist forces failed to advance towards Vientiane and had issues with resupplying their means. Now, they accepted a ceasefire. Although the fighting mostly stopped after this, the agreement was frequently violated, just like many previous and subsequent Lao ceasefires.¹¹³ The ceasefire also had more burdensome adverse effects. Indeed, Laos became more divided into fixed Pathet Lao as well as fixed Royal Lao areas. This enabled the Pathet Lao to keep the Ho Chi Minh Trail going in their part of Laos and, therefore, to keep fuelling the growing Vietnam War. This illustrates the importance of the connection between the developments in Laos and Vietnam. If the communists were strong in one of the countries, they would also become strong in the other country.¹¹⁴

Soon after the Geneva Conference started, Kennedy met with Khrushchev in Vienna. The main reasons why Kennedy arranged this meeting were his increasing anxiety about the communist threat in “Third World” countries and his worry that Khrushchev did not believe Kennedy wanted to seek a solution for Berlin, or any other matter, after how fierce he acted regarding the Bay of Pigs.¹¹⁵ The summit proceeded differently than Kennedy expected. He wanted understanding and reasonable talks, but soon got frustrated and irritated with Khrushchev’s behaviour. Kennedy felt that he was treating him like a “little boy” and only wanted to debate and out-argue the less experienced Kennedy.¹¹⁶ Despite their differences, they did seem to agree on one matter, Laos. Contrary to Kennedy, Khrushchev did not perceive Laos to be an urgent matter. They decided, however, that the current, dangerous situation had to be eased and an independent and neutral Laos should be aimed at. Moreover, they both recognised the crucial importance of an effective ceasefire as the conference in Geneva continued. Despite how stiff the Vienna summit went, the Cold War tensions not eased after it, as Kennedy had hoped, the events in Laos took positive turns. However, this was only temporary.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ NSA, *Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*, 50-51, 53.

¹¹⁴ Friedman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War*, 251; Shaw, ‘Laotian “Neutrality”: A Fresh Look at a Key Vietnam War Blunder,’ 44.

¹¹⁵ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, 401-403.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 408.

¹¹⁷ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 107: Memorandum of Conversation, 3 June 1961; Mishra, ‘From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,’ 109-110; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: J.F. Kennedy In The White House* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1965), 338.

Indeed, the Geneva discussions made little progress towards a resolution as the conference lingered during the second half of 1961. It did not seem as if a resolution would be presented soon, but there was also not enough provocation that could be used by either side to abandon the negotiations. This was partly due to the monsoon season in Laos during which heavy rainfalls ceased action on the ground. The structure of the new Souvanna Phouma-led coalition government, the disarmament and integration of the different armed groups into the RLA and the role of the ICC remained stumbling points. Furthermore, General Phoumi turned out to be imperceptive for attempts by the international community to persuade him to cooperate in the establishment of a coalition government led by Souvanna.¹¹⁸

As the endless negotiations were progressing slowly, the Soviets became somewhat impatient.¹¹⁹ This appears from Khrushchev's complaining about Washington demanding too much from Souvanna. Hence, Khrushchev urged Kennedy to stop doing this because, this way, he was threatening the formation of a coalition government. Instead, Kennedy should allow Souvanna to form a government.¹²⁰ It seems that Kennedy listened to Khrushchev's complaints because, after this, Washington started making more considerable efforts towards the formation of a coalition government in Laos. He most likely listened to Khrushchev because he did not want to provoke him as their relationship had not improved after Vienna. In November 1961, the embassy in Laos was commissioned to commit to convincing Souvanna, as well as Phoumi, that the US was prepared to fully support and cooperate towards a genuinely unified Lao government if Souvanna would let them. Furthermore, if Souvanna would present a reasonable arrangement, the Kennedy administration would also encourage Phoumi to accept it. This conception shows that Kennedy was eager to maximise American efforts in order to achieve reconciliation.¹²¹

Kennedy continued these efforts at the beginning of 1962. From records of meetings with his staff, it appears that he considered sustaining the ceasefire as a top priority. He also wanted to deal with Phoumi firmly and not let him dominate US policy because it had to be prevented that Phoumi would take risky or unexpected actions.¹²² The Kennedy administration,

¹¹⁸ Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, 43-44.

¹¹⁹ Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, *A Hard and Bitter Peace: A Global History of the Cold War* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 243.

¹²⁰ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 224: Editorial Note, 10 November 1961.

¹²¹ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 232: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 19 November 1961.

¹²² JFK Library, Laos: Security, March 1962: 1 January-15 April, Memorandum for the Record: Meeting in the Cabinet Room on January 6, 1962, on the subject of Laos, 15 January 1962.

therefore, urged Phoumi to cooperate and threaten him with cutting off American aid.¹²³ These threats did not seem to change Phoumi. Towards the end of February, Kennedy, therefore, instructed US ambassador of Laos Winthrop Brown to impose whatever sanctions were necessary to make Phoumi agree with transferring the power to Souvanna softly.¹²⁴ However, Phoumi would still not budge and declined all American approaches.¹²⁵ Hence, at the end of April, Kennedy decided to pressure Phoumi even further by publicly declaring that the US would not blindly intervene to provide Phoumi with military support if the Geneva negotiations would break down. Still, Kennedy was unwilling to suspend the military aid entirely because he was worried that such a drastic move would undermine Phoumi altogether and ruin the chances of realising a truly neutral Laos.¹²⁶

Paradoxically, it was not the Americans, but the Pathet Lao, who changed Phoumi's attitude eventually. In May 1962, Phoumi sent additional RLA forces to Nam Tha, a village about 10 kilometres from the Chinese border. He still thought he could provoke the US and get American forces on the ground in Laos. Washington strongly urged Phoumi to halt this action, because this would anger the Pathet Lao or China. Though, this was precisely what Phoumi aimed at because he thought that Kennedy would then come to the rescue. However, Washington did not respond in the way that Phoumi had hoped. This illustrates how Kennedy would not deviate from his formulated policy and was not sensitive to Phoumi's risky actions.¹²⁷

Since the Americans did not come to the rescue, Phoumi was unable to keep Nam Tha, and the village quickly fell into the hands of the Pathet Lao.¹²⁸ As this loss also cost Phoumi his prestige, Washington gained more leverage on him. As a result, Phoumi finally agreed to cooperate at the end of May.¹²⁹ Now, it did not take long before a coalition government under Souvanna was formed. Four Royal Lao members, four Pathet Lao members and eleven neutralists were going to be part of the new government. Consequently, on July 23, 1962, the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos was signed in Geneva. It was agreed that all foreign bases

¹²³ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 270: Telegram From the Delegation to the Conference on Laos to the Department of State, 15 January 1962; FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 278: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 27 January 1962.

¹²⁴ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 301: Instructions Approved by President Kennedy, 28 February 1962.

¹²⁵ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 317: Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 25 March 1962.

¹²⁶ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 336: Memorandum of Conversation, 28 April 1962; Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, 44.

¹²⁷ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 289; FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 360: Telegram From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt), 12 May 1962.

¹²⁸ Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,' 110.

¹²⁹ Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, 45; Jacobs, 'Laos,' 255.

had to be removed from Laos. Furthermore, the established government would only be active until proper elections were realised for a permanent government.¹³⁰

All in all, Kennedy was eager to negotiate a settlement in Laos even though America's Lao ally Phoumi was not as willing to cooperate. They also turned out to be imperceptive of far-reaching threats such as cutting off financial support. Kennedy did not budge, and he was still not prepared to intervene militarily, even when Phoumi was losing from the communist forces. The fact that Phoumi was losing in the spring of 1962 made him give in and cooperate in negotiating a settlement finally.

The aftermath of the Geneva Conference

Under the conditions of the Geneva settlement, a ceasefire between the RLG, on one side, and the Pathet Lao and the neutralists, on the other side, went into effect. Foreign troops and military staff had to leave Laos before October 1962, because they were not allowed to meddle in the national affairs of Laos anymore. The Americans had to withdraw their forces that had been supporting the RLA troops. Although American military personnel had to leave, the CIA did carry on secret support to a peculiar blooming army around the Plain of Jars, under the authority of the Hmong. The ongoing fighting took its toll on the inhabitants, among which the Hmong. The people that did not fight had to flee from the communists constantly. Many of them hid in the forests for years with not enough access to water and food. Even though all foreign troops had to withdraw, the North Vietnamese did not withdraw all of them and continued their support for the Pathet Lao and the fighting against the Hmong.¹³¹

In the beginning, the new coalition government seemed to be functioning smoothly. However, this did not last long. Every matter the government had to decide on was settled in accordance with unanimity rule. Because all three factions had to agree, it soon became apparent that it was impossible to make decisions. The factions wrangled over the allocation of foreign aid since they all aimed at maximum support for their own faction. Furthermore, all three leaders kept control of their own military forces, which hindered the formation of one unified Lao army. The three factions were also still mutually suspicious of each other, which

¹³⁰ United Nations, Treaty Series, no. 6564, Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, signed at Geneva, 23 July 1962, accessed June 12, 2020, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20456/volume-456-I-6564-English.pdf>; Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 124.

¹³¹ Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between*, 124; Elliott, 'RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,' 549; Concordia University, HOHP, Interviews with Khu Thao and Gary Yia Lee.

caused the government to be even more unstable. Although Souvanna wanted to achieve national reconciliation, he attempted to prevent the Pathet Lao from gaining a dominant role.¹³²

For their part, the Royal Lao were still hoping to get foreign support to minimise the role of the communists, despite the conditions that were agreed on during the Geneva conference. They wanted reinforcements against the continuing communist build-up of strength.¹³³ The RLG was not alone in this. In early October, Souvanna turned to both the Soviets and the Americans for help regarding transporting supplies to neutralist forces in secluded areas. In response, both sent support. Washington was not surprised but pleased that Souvanna was requesting for American aid. This made it clear that the Pathet Lao-neutral alliance had merely been one of convenience. For some time, American intelligence observations had reported troubles and tensions between the two factions. The communists, for instance, seized supplies provided by the Soviet airlift that were meant for the neutralists. As a result, they had severe shortages in terms of food, clothing and weaponry.¹³⁴

Not only the communist-neutral alliance proved to be shaky, but the neutralists and the RLG also did not achieve rapprochement. Although this seemed to be the case at first, as they had the same goal of defeating the communists, this soon appeared to be an illusion. Old hostilities revived when Phoumi arrested four neutralist officers, including two personal staff members of Souvanna.¹³⁵ Washington was not pleased about this. After all, the Kennedy administration wanted to ensure a unified, neutral and cooperative government. Kennedy, therefore, urged Phoumi to cooperate with Souvanna sincerely to maintain a broad and robust non-communist front. Washington also warned Phoumi that his faction would be held responsible for not sufficiently supporting Souvanna whenever the new government would fall. This illustrates how Phoumi, even though he had received American support for a long time, was not easily threatened by Kennedy. However, Kennedy would not be pushed around and stayed firm with him.¹³⁶

Around the same time, in November 1962, Kennedy authorised assistance to neutralist forces to show Souvanna American continuing support.¹³⁷ In the following months, the US

¹³² Mishra, 'From Geneva to Geneva: A Discourse on Geo-Political Dimension of Conflict in Laos: 1954-1962,' 113.

¹³³ Paul et al., 'Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies,' 151.

¹³⁴ NSA, *Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*, 78.

¹³⁵ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 432: Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, 8 November 1962.

¹³⁶ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 433: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 9 November 1962.

¹³⁷ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 434: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 9 November 1962.

regularly flew food and supplies to the Plain of Jars under ICC supervision, and their support for the neutralists continued. According to a Hmong refugee, planes flew over very frequently, dropping military supplies and large bags of rice for the refugees. Tragically, those bags sometimes hit people on the ground and killed several of them.¹³⁸ Surprisingly, the Americans were not the only ones that provided support for the neutralists. It seems like Phoumi finally listened to Washington because he now started to support the neutralists with food, weaponry and medical supplies as well. He even agreed with Souvanna on a joint defence plan in case the conditions in the Plain of Jars would deteriorate and lead to open warfare. This shows how the continuing Pathet Lao attacks had brought Phoumi, Souvanna and Washington closer.¹³⁹

However, this improving relationship could not provide long-lasting peace. The differences and fighting with the Pathet Lao continued to be overwhelming. It was the last straw when the Pathet Lao, in the spring of 1963, launched a major attack on neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars which crushed them. Less than twelve months after the Geneva agreement was signed, the Lao coalition government broke down.¹⁴⁰ Kennedy decided not to intervene militarily, so he did not change his policy regarding Southeast Asia because of these events. Kennedy still believed that the US had to prevent the dominoes from falling just as Eisenhower did. However, he also still felt that “If we have to fight in Southeast Asia, we will fight in South Vietnam.” Kennedy figured that countering communism would be most successful in South Vietnam as the South Vietnamese were “real fighters”. So, the dominoes would be kept from falling in Vietnam, not in Laos.¹⁴¹

In conclusion, the Geneva settlement fell apart because of the continuing fighting between the different parties. Although the Americans had to withdraw their forces, Washington continued pressuring Phoumi to cooperate with Souvanna afterwards. Despite these efforts, the continuous fighting with the communists made it impossible to realise long-lasting peace. Although Kennedy decided not to intervene when the Lao government fell in the spring of 1963, instead, he chose to focus on fighting communism in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, the CIA did carry on secret support for the Hmong in their combat against the communists. How this went about and how the Americans and Hmong perceived this collaboration will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹³⁸ NSA, *Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*, 80-81; Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Gary Yia Lee.

¹³⁹ NSA, *Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*, 80-81.

¹⁴⁰ Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between*, 125; Elliott, ‘RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era,’ 28.

¹⁴¹ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, 297.

Chapter 3: The Hmong people and the Americans in the Lao Civil War

This chapter will discuss the experiences of the Lao Hmong and their views on the American intervention in the Lao Civil War. To examine these experiences, this chapter will elaborate on who the Hmong are, what their role was in the Lao Civil War, how they perceived the War and how they perceived the intervention of the Kennedy administration. In order to do this, interviews with Hmong refugees will be used. All people that were interviewed for the Hmong Oral History Project received help from the CIA officials in Laos and later fled to the US. Therefore, it is not surprising that the interviewed Hmong refugees were rather positive about American involvement in Laos. After all, they helped them survive the War. Regardless, the interviews provide interesting insights into the lives of the Hmong in Laos and their experiences.

The Hmong people of Laos

Laos can be described as a multi-ethnic country since just a slightly larger part of its population belongs to the Lao majority, and nearly the other half of the Lao inhabitants has different ethnical backgrounds.¹⁴² The Hmong is one of these ethnical groups. Although their precise origin remains unclear, the Hmong people and their culture can be traced back more than 4000 years in China. After centuries of persecution in China, hundreds of thousands of Hmong people started migrating to neighbouring countries in the early 1800s. They settled into the highlands of Vietnam, Thailand, Burma and Laos. Wherever they settled, they mostly lived independently and away from society.¹⁴³

Because in China they referred to most southern minorities as “Miao”, a term that is nowadays mostly used to address the Hmong, it remains difficult to establish when “Miao” means Hmong.¹⁴⁴ Although the five million Hmong people in China are still referred to as “Miao”, for the Lao Hmong people, this term has a different definition. For them, the words “Miao”, and the resulting “Meo” that is often used to address the Hmong people in Laos, have a negative charge and imply disdain and slavery.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Jean Michaud, ‘Handling Mountain Minorities in China, Vietnam and Laos: From History to Current Concerns’, *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 1 (February 2009): 25.

¹⁴³ Paul Hillmer, *A People’s History of the Hmong* (Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 22, 23.

¹⁴⁴ Hillmer, *A People’s History of the Hmong*, 22.

¹⁴⁵ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993): 3.

Speaking of meaning, the word “Hmong” connotes “free people” or “those who must have their freedom and independence.” This corresponds with the most valuable concepts of the Hmong culture, which are freedom, engagement, loyalty and honour.¹⁴⁶ From interviews with Hmong refugees from the Lao Civil War, their value of freedom is present indeed. Whenever the refugees talk about their lives in Laos before the Civil War, they often mention how free they were, even though they had little free time. Their daily cycle in Laos consisted of gardening, farming and harvesting. They worked every day from five in the morning until seven at night. Children would learn how to garden at the age of six or seven and were fully integrated into the work cycle of their parents. Despite the long, and often tough, hours they worked, they describe their lives in Laos as free.¹⁴⁷ Khu Thao, a farmer, recalls that “there was a lot of freedom during that lifetime. There were no debts to pay, no taxes to pay, no one to boss you around, and no one to tell me what to do. The only thing that was scary back then in the days were the tigers.” Similarly, Fong Her, also a farmer, describes how “when we were in Laos, we were in the mountains. We were free to hunt, to do whatever. We were farmers so we were not a typical American farmer but a mountain farmer. That meant that we had to cut down a lot of the forest just to plant (slash and burn method) our crops. Free to hunt, to fish and to whatever.”¹⁴⁸

Besides the importance of the concept of freedom, the religion the Hmong people practice is a form of animistic spirituality. It involves soothing the benign and malign spirits that inhabit the natural world. Those spirits are often ancestors or prominent leaders of the past.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, shaman ceremonies are an important aspect of the Hmong tradition. During those “calling the souls ceremonies” the shaman, the person that lead these healing ceremonies, calls the people’s spirits to come together “so there is peaceful living and the spirits do not separate.”¹⁵⁰

Although the Hmong lived rather independently from other groups in the Lao society and they had their religion and traditions, the Lao also encouraged them to participate in national Lao festivals. The Lao Hmong were also encouraged to learn the Lao language and take part in the Lao educational system. Because of this, cultural and social change among the

¹⁴⁶ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Khu Thao.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., Interview with Fong Her.

¹⁴⁹ Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: US Doctrine and Performance* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 131.

¹⁵⁰ Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Mai Lee.

Hmong did take place in the 1950s. However, since an increase of Hmong interaction with lowland Lao required adjustment on both sides, changes developed slowly.¹⁵¹

The Hmong during the Lao Civil War

As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, the Lao Hmong played a significant role during the Lao Civil War. Their community had already been disrupted occasionally during the Indochina War. However, they only became involved in more extensive combat since the beginning of the 1960s.¹⁵² In the same month that Kennedy was inaugurated as President, in January 1961, Bill Lair, a CIA officer who had already been stationed in Thailand for almost a decade, approached Hmong leader Vang Pao with a proposal. Lair offered Vang Pao, the only Hmong Colonel (later General) in the RLA, American support. He provided training, supplies, and weaponry to defend themselves as well as prevent communism from spreading. In the subsequent years, the Hmong people, next to the ethnic Lao and several other minority groups, fought vigorously against communism in Laos.¹⁵³

The CIA approached Vang Pao because they needed the Hmong's fighting power and their knowledge about the area as the War was becoming more difficult. Furthermore, the Hmong would need to spy and report to the Americans where the North Vietnamese were situated so they would know where to drop their bombs.¹⁵⁴ The CIA also wanted to work with the Hmong because they were known for their aggressiveness and outstanding fighting skills, and they were much better fighters than the Royal Lao soldiers. Because of these considerations, they were pleased that Vang Pao was willing to cooperate. Vang Pao told the CIA: "We cannot get along with the communists. The Hmong's way of life is completely different from that of the communists. We have two choices, to leave Laos or fight them. If you give us weapons, we will fight."¹⁵⁵

The shared American-Hmong goal to defeat the communists in Laos was not the only reason Vang Pao decided to cooperate. Vang Pao also viewed American involvement strategically. He reasoned that their chances of defeating the communists would be largest with American support. After all, the Americans had won the First and Second World War. Vang Pao felt that the North Vietnamese would have no chance against the powerful Americans. He

¹⁵¹ Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between*, 139.

¹⁵² Ibid., 140.

¹⁵³ Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 12, 19.

¹⁵⁴ Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Colonel Gao Moua.

¹⁵⁵ Sutayut Osornprasop, 'Amidst the Heat of the Cold War in Asia: Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina (1960-74)', *Cold War History* 7, no. 3 (2007): 356-357.

also felt encouraged, because he believed that the Americans needed the Hmong to defeat the communists.¹⁵⁶ Not only Vang Pao was enthusiastic about collaborating with the Americans. The CIA propaganda recruitment message also appealed to many Hmong civilians. After all, in their message, the CIA assured them that they would provide the means necessary to fight and defend their homes against the North Vietnamese threat. This message attracted the freedom-loving Hmong. Soon, a guerrilla force was born.¹⁵⁷

Bill Lair believed that by supporting the Hmong, the US was upholding something that the Hmong would also have done without their support.¹⁵⁸ After all, the Hmong were already involved in the conflict and supported the RLA in their fight against the communists.¹⁵⁹ In fact, their collaboration with the Americans was nothing new because they already received support since the mid-1950s in the shape of weaponry. This continued and expanded now that Vang Pao agreed to cooperate. Even after the signing of the Geneva agreement in 1962, the CIA did not cease its work with the Hmong.¹⁶⁰

It may seem that the Hmong were the only Lao people that fought against the communists. Furthermore, in the existing literature, it is often argued that the Hmong were the only decent fighters as well. However, according to Paul Hillmer, who did research on the Hmong people and conducted the interviews with the refugees, many other Lao ethnic groups fought vigorously alongside the Hmong. Above all, the Americans worked with ethnic Lao and other ethnic minorities, the Khmu and Mien, as well. Even though the vital role of Hmong should not be minimised, these other Lao groups were also trained by the CIA and made significant contributions to the fight against the communists.¹⁶¹

In any case, from multiple American governmental documents, it appears that both Eisenhower and Kennedy focused on the Hmong and supporting them. From the beginning, the Kennedy administration provided the Hmong with supplies such as weaponry. Furthermore, it provided support for Hmong refugees that lost their livelihoods due to the fighting.¹⁶² Throughout Kennedy's whole presidency, the American objective regarding the Hmong was to

¹⁵⁶ Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 91.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas S. Vang, *A History of the Hmong: From Ancient Times to the Modern Diaspora* (Morrisville: Lulu Press, 2008), 231-232.

¹⁵⁸ Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 114.

¹⁵⁹ Paul et al., 'Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies,' 147.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 148, 150-151.

¹⁶¹ Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 97.

¹⁶² FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 123: Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (McConaughy) to the Under Secretary of State (Bowles), 26 June 1961.

keep supporting them. Because the Hmong prevented the communists from gaining strength and because they supported the neutralist forces, they were valuable assets overall.¹⁶³

Though the Americans perceived them as assets, the Hmong people lived under difficult circumstances during the Civil War. They were often poor, scared and had to move from place to place, which made it impossible for them to farm and, therefore, to eat and keep themselves alive. Khu Thao describes how they constantly had to flee from the communists: “We would sometimes go and hide in the forests and live there for a while until it was safe to move again. All the hills we climbed and all the bad times we had are very vivid to me. I will always remember those times and I wish we had left our country.”¹⁶⁴

Besides, the people that did not flee from the communists also experienced difficult times since the North Vietnamese often invaded their properties. Xai Thao, a local farmer, remembers how the North Vietnamese robbed them from things they had worked hard for. If Hmong people wore a new outfit or made some profit with a business, the North Vietnamese would take these people and interrogate them. They already hated them if they had slightly more than they did.¹⁶⁵ Overall, the Hmong were vastly anti-communists. Another refugee, Xao Vang Vue, also a local farmer, has described communists as “bad people that want to take another person’s land. They want to take someone else’s land and make it theirs.”¹⁶⁶

However, this does not mean all Hmong were anti-communists. Pao Vue, a Hmong American academic who conducted research in Laos, has argued that while most Hmong sided with the US, many other Hmong were pro-communist and joined the Pathet Lao. As a result, people of the same clans or even families fought on opposite sides. After the War, many of the pro-communist Hmong stayed in Laos and rebuilt the country. Some of them also tried to convince their relatives who sided with the US to join them. Others, however, were more bitter and perceived them as traitors. This caused the strong and solid Hmong community to weaken. Many anti-communist Hmong even fled the country because of it. Even decades after the War ended, many of those Hmong still dreamt of returning to their home country since they miss it so much. However, most of them are too afraid of the mistrust between them and the pro-communist Hmong who stayed behind.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ FRUS, Laos Crisis, Document 472: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 24 May 1963.

¹⁶⁴ Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Khu Thao.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., Interview with Xai Thao.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., Interview with Xao Vang Vue.

¹⁶⁷ Pao Vue, ‘The Vietnam War and Its Impacts on the Hmong’, *Geopolitics* 20, no. 4 (2015): 750-751.

In any case, only the anti-communist Hmong were interviewed, and therefore, only their experiences are examined here. From the interviewed people, three of them were directly asked why the Hmong collaborated with the Americans during the War. All three of them responded in similar ways. Xai Thao, Xai Vang Vue and Mai Lee, all farmers in Laos, said that the Hmong helped the Americans because of the anti-communist aspect and because they had been helping them. They, therefore, considered it important to help the Americans.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, the Hmong were poor people, and the Americans were “strong and rich,” according to Xai Thao.¹⁶⁹ Mai Lee recalled that they wanted to help the Americans because they came to free them. Many of them had to leave their homes since it had become too dangerous to stay. As they had to flee and were no longer able to grow and eat their own food, the Americans helped them by providing food so they could survive.¹⁷⁰

The above shows that the interviewees are quite positive about the American involvement. However, this is not surprising since they did help them flee the country and, eventually survive the War. It is also possible that they were positive about the Americans because Vang Pao was. They just wanted to follow their leader since they had faith in him and his agreement with the Americans.¹⁷¹ At any rate, the Hmong certainly did not cooperate with the Americans to be able to flee to the US. They preferred to stay on their lands as long as possible, even under dangerous and horrendous circumstances. They fought to protect their lands because they wanted to prevent having to seek refuge in the US.¹⁷²

Despite these positive accounts, American support was not unconditional. Although the Americans did send food to certain areas where Hmong people lived, not all Hmong people that were struggling because of the War were taken care of. According to Poj Noj Her, “They did provide some but your husband had to be a soldier for you to receive anything. If you did not have a son or a husband in the military, then it was very hard for you.” The Americans kept track of the soldiers that were fighting alongside them and determined on the basis thereof who would receive aid.¹⁷³ Regardless of these distinctions and conditions to receive aid, the Americans did help many Hmong to flee to Thailand and some, thereafter to the US.¹⁷⁴

All in all, the Lao Hmong played a significant role during the Lao Civil War. In collaboration with the Americans, they fought vigorously against the communist enemy. For

¹⁶⁸ Concordia University, HOHP, Interviews with Xai Thao, Xai Vang Vue, and Mai Lee.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., Interview with Xai Thao.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., Interview with Mai Lee.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., Interview with Geu Vang.

¹⁷² Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 197-198.

¹⁷³ Concordia University, HOHP, Interview with Poj Noj Her.

¹⁷⁴ Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 197.

the Americans, the Hmong were merely assets that fought to reach their goal, but, as the interviewed refugees recalled, they lived under challenging circumstances during the War. By fighting against the communists, they were only trying to preserve their lands and livelihoods. Overall, the Hmong interviewed refugees are rather positive about American involvement because they helped many of them survive the War and seek refuge in the US. However, most Hmong fought alongside the Americans to preserve their existence in Laos. Indeed, they did not collaborate with the Americans because they considered it as an opportunity to escape the dangers in Laos and seek refuge in the US. Quite the contrary, the Hmong people wanted to stay in Laos and fight for their peaceful pre-existence there.

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis has been twofold. On the one hand, it has aimed to examine Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy regarding Laos and investigate how his administration approached the Civil War in Laos. On the other hand, it has endeavoured to examine the role and experiences of the Lao Hmong people in the Civil War based on interviews with Hmong refugees. After all, in the existing literature, US foreign policy during the Lao Civil War is not often examined on its own. Mostly, only studies on the Vietnam War discuss it. Furthermore, whenever the Lao Civil War is discussed, only the US perspective is illuminated. Therefore, this thesis has contributed to the existing literature by examining the Lao Civil War thoroughly and exposing the perspective of a Lao faction, the Hmong.

This thesis has reached several findings. Firstly, the literature review regarding Kennedy's Cold War foreign policy has shown how Kennedy evolved during his presidency. At the beginning of his presidency, he pushed hard when dealing with the crises he faced and continued Eisenhower's Cold Warrior attitude. However, as Kennedy's presidency developed, he became more cautious. These crises had deteriorated the American-Soviet relationship, which was the opposite of what Kennedy wanted. Because he did not want to provoke the Soviets anymore, he started seeking cooperation rather than confrontation. This shift proved to be a turning point in the Cold War.

Regarding Southeast Asia specifically, Kennedy considered the strength of the domino theory. However, he did not want to continue Eisenhower's ways of combatting communism and his conventional emphasis on military agreements and formal alliances in the "Third World". Instead, Kennedy aimed at development aid and creating more sustainable pro-western regimes. In Laos, he was highly preoccupied with realising this, even more than in Vietnam. What happened in Vietnam was considerably connected to what happened in Laos and the other way around. If the communists were able to make advances in one of the countries, they were also stronger in the other.

Vietnam was not the only important factor in Kennedy's decision-making regarding Laos. Since Kennedy perceived the Cold War system as interdependent, other crises in Cuba and Berlin also influenced his decision-making. This perception leads to the second finding of this thesis. Even though at the beginning of his presidency, Kennedy was rather hesitant about intervening militarily in Laos whenever the communists would be progressing, this changed as his presidency evolved. Most likely because of the other crises Kennedy faced around the globe, he wanted to prevent another failure, like the Bay of Pigs invasion, from happening. Therefore,

Kennedy decided to rule out military intervention in Laos at all costs. Even when the coalition government that had been established during the Geneva Conference broke down, he stuck to his decision.

Instead, Kennedy decided to focus on combatting communism in South Vietnam and increased American presence there. His counterinsurgency policy was mostly focused on Vietnam because he considered that the military prospects were brighter there than in Laos. This action shows that Kennedy was just as eager as Eisenhower to defeat communism. However, he believed that their chances to do so were higher in Vietnam. So, if they had to fight in Southeast Asia at some point, they would fight in Vietnam, not in Laos. Even though Kennedy strengthened the American position in Vietnam, this thesis has shown that this was not the case for Laos. Regarding Laos, Kennedy became more cautious in his Cold War foreign policy as his presidency evolved.

Despite Kennedy's decision not to intervene in Laos militarily, the CIA kept supporting the Lao Hmong in their combat against the communists. The Hmong played a significant role during the War. Although the American-Hmong shared goal to defeat the communists ensured their cooperation, their interests were different. This is the third finding of this thesis. For the Americans, defeating communism in Laos was a strategic goal. It was a crisis, among many others, and, above all, a Cold War struggle. For the Hmong, it was a way more personal struggle. The interviews with the Hmong refugees show that they just wanted to defend their lands and their livelihoods. Even though they were mostly anti-communists, they, above all, wanted to preserve their existence. This conception also caused them to collaborate with the Americans. The Hmong perceived them to be useful in achieving their goals, to defeat communism and preserve their existence.

Including the perceptions of the Hmong has provided the ability to place the American interests and actions during the Lao Civil War in a broader perspective. Because of the discussion of both sides, a more comprehensive view on the interests and actions of both these sides has been established. For further research and to gain an even more comprehensive view on the Civil War, it would be valuable to examine other Lao groups and their perceptions of the conflict and the Americans, next to those of the Hmong. For example, investigating groups that did not experience American support or appreciation as well as experiences of pro-communist factions would be a desirable addition to the research that has been done for this thesis. It has not been possible to include the examination of other groups in this research because of the absence of digital archival sources on other Lao factions. Nonetheless, the interviews with the Lao Hmong have provided valuable insights into the War, as illustrated in this thesis.

All in all, this thesis has taken up a central issue of American Cold War foreign policy, the containment of communism. It has not only elaborated on the political and strategic objectives of the Kennedy administration, but it has also investigated the personal and indigenous side of the Lao Hmong people in their combat against the communists. This thesis has shown how the government of a Cold War superpower and a remote Lao minority, with different motives, collaborated because they had the same goal of defeating communism.

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