

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WWU - 6
Neutral in Name Only

The Vieng Villay,
Vientiane, Laos.
January 7, 1959.

Mr. Walter S. Rogers.
Institute of Current World Affairs.
366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Laos has reduced me to a pre-verbal means of communication in an attempt to make my needs known, and I am afraid I have suffered from Mother not being around to figure out what Baby wants. I have been pretty near complete frustration in my three days here. When I try to remember my few years of high school and college French, it somehow comes out of my mouth in Mandarin Chinese, a language I later studied. When I try to locate anyone for an interview, I not only have to discard the phone and phonebook (non-existent conveniences which I find I have taken for granted), I have to discard directions as well. Vientiane, Laos' governmental capital (the King, I learn, keeps his court up country at Luang Prabang), has no street signs for its dusty wa gon ruts and, as far as I can determine, no names for them anyway. Nor are there street numbers. And when I went to look up a Mr. Sisouk, a nice distinguished name for the Secretary of State for Information, I ended up at the office of Mr. Sisouk, the Mercedes distributor, and three-quarters of an hour late for my appointment at that. I didn't mean to mention the word Mercedes casually for although Laos may be only a frontier curleyque a little larger than the State of Kansas tucked against China's border in the northern part of the old French Indo-China, it does have a multitude of Mercedes cars, and not the cheapest models either.

But back to the agonies of not being able to communicate. When it comes to eating, I, mindful of everything Americans had said not to eat and not very aware of what was left, manage to gather the whole dining room and kitchen crews around my table as they try to decipher what I mean by "cuire?", a word the French dictionary tells me means "cook-boil." (Actually, not many Lao speak French anyway as even the French pretty much ignored colonizing the area. And they probably decided that it was hardly worth the six to seven years study necessary to speak passable Lao, especially since the country's 1.5 to 4 million people -- nobody knows how many -- have 30-odd tribal languages anyway.) And my quarters here in Vientiane's newest "hotel," the upstairs of the Thai Airways office where rooms are built Army-barracks-style with screened openings into the central hall, also has meant frustration. After I begin to drowse off at night despite the crinkling of cellophane in the room nextdoor, the man across the hall going to the john or mere whispers from the room at the far end of the corridor, the Chinese dance hall girls begin to turn in and giggle away, full voice, for the rest of the night. What they are saying seems enough like Mandarin to make me want to eavesdrop. Yet when the din goes on beyond curiosity and I scream to them to shut up, it turns out that they must be speaking Cantonese for they can't understand a word I say.

But the final frustration, Mr. Rogers, is the realization that here I am, a foreigner, just taking care of the needs of me for three brief days, and all but failing. What must the other foreigners do, the

ones who have to take care of themselves, and their families for two-year hitches and who are charged by such governments as the U.S. with conducting foreign relations and foreign aid missions?

Leonard (Lee) Bacon, a career foreign service officer who is the U.S. Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission here, acknowledges that even with the 25 per cent pay differential for a maximum hardship post, Laos' American colony tends to get "sort of potbound." Really the only practical way out of even Vientiane is by plane, and that means Saigon or Bangkok, which are expensive expeditions. A good amount of the 250 Americans in Vientiane live in the self-sufficient colony compound described in "The Ugly American." But with my brief and violent experience of frustration here, I am hardly in a position to cast stones. And whereas there have been reports of Cadillacs being rampant among Americans, I learned that Vientiane has but two Cadillacs. One belongs to the Crown Prince. The other, a red convertible, to the U.S. Army attaché's sergeant. Over breakfast coffee the other morning, Chris Chapman, the U.S. Embassy political officer praised the Laotian determination for self-improvement and then mused: "Actually, we're the only ones who are vulnerable, for it's we who need the running water, gas and electricity."

My observations on Laos are limited not only to my three-day stay, but to the fact that, except for one brief interview (I finally found the right Sisouk, had to return again with an interpreter and still got nowhere), my views of Laos have been predigested for me by the Americans who are stationed here.

First off, Laos goes under the name of "neutral" although she comes under the area "umbrella" protection of the West's SEATO. Then, for all-out nose-thumbing at her Red China neighbor, Laos only two weeks ago welcomed the opening of a Nationalist Chinese consulate here. The consulate, I am told, is the result of a friendship established between Prime Minister Phoui (pronounced "phooey") Sananikone and Chiang Kai-shek's Ambassador to Thailand. Further belieing Laos' "neutral" position, the country accepts something like \$26 million annually in U.S. aid -- two-thirds of the national budget -- and "ex-servicemen" minus uniform compose the "Program Evaluation Office" under the U.S. Operations Mission, the overseas name for our foreign aid program.

Now Laos not only shares a border with Communist China, she has a very long border with the Democratic Republic of Northern Viet Nam, the Communist Viet Minh nation whose estimated 250,000 troops are supposed to outnumber the Lao army by a proportion of 10 to 1. Right now there is a border dispute which may well become serious. The Lao have charged the Viet Minh with invading three of their villages. The Viet Minh have charged the Lao with invading one of theirs. The area, as in most of Laos, is remote and the border ill-defined. (The French used to designate the inner borders of French Indo-China's Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia according to convenience in getting around and a rough approximation of the watershed, and let it go at that.)

And this is only Laos' external situation. Internally, the Government, which was never groomed for the job by the French, is both inexperienced and weak. The local rebel party (some call it Communist, others nationalistic-inspired), the Neo Lao Haksat, is led by a Prince no less. He is Prince Souphanouvong, a half-brother of the last Prime Minister and a descendant of the family of "The King Who Goes Before," the Lao equivalent of Japan's old Mikado-bossing Shoguns. The Prince is managing to keep everyone on the edge of his chair. U.S. officials have no love for him personally, but they also say that they have no real evidence that he is a Communist. I visited his house which faces the banks of the Mekong River, had a nice talk with his secretary (SHE spoke English) but failed to find him in so my personal FBI check won't help either.

At any event, the Prince formally exiled himself with the Pathet Lao in the country's two border provinces and it was not until 1957 that these Communist-encouraged areas were coaxed back into the fold. When they were, the "ICC" (International Commission of Supervision and Control which grew out of the 1954 Geneva conference on the breakup of French Indo-China) was thanked for its services by the Lao Government and invited to pack up and go home. The ICC was composed of Canada, India and Poland and it is said that the Poles were particularly miffed because they nourished hopes of establishing a permanent mission in Laos and, therefore, a permanent Communist beachhead. Now the gossip is that the Viet Minh are purposely harassing the frontier in order to force the resumption of the ICC.

Internally, my brief contact with Sisouk (the Information Minister, not the Mercedes man) was minus any foreknowledge of his background. I now learn that although he is only 30 he is one of the leaders of a group of 40 military-intellectual, anti-Communist "Young Turks" who formed the Committee for the Defense of the National Interests to stiffen up their wobbly government. Sisouk was deputy chief of Laos' UN delegation at last year's General Assembly (actually the mission was composed of but two, Sisouk and the U.S. Ambassador) and is looked upon by some as Laos' next Prime Minister. There is also gossip of another military coup -- such as occurred in Pakistan, Burma and Thailand. Only this time it is speculated that it would be in the form of a liaison between the Crown Prince (the King is too aged and ailing to ever leave his court) and the Army.

Why is this small, poor, backwoods country with only 1.5 to 4 million people so important to us? One official summed it up this way: "Laos doesn't weigh a peanut on the scale of world power, unless it is lost. Its value to us is negative. If Laos goes, the Thais could flip. There would be more pressure on Cambodia to remain less 'neutral.' And the British, particularly, are worried over what might happen to Malaya and Singapore. They feel we have to hold the line here."

On such matters of high policy, a three-day visitor such as myself is in no position to agree or disagree. I can be definite on only two things: Language is more than an art of communication, it's a necessity; and Laos may call herself a neutral but from everything I've seen, she is a neutral in name only.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Warren W. Unna', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Warren W. Unna

Received New York January 28, 1959