

DECLASSIFIED
Authority NLE 2010-76
By MLK NLDDE Date 8/11/11

~~SECRET~~



*show
draft to DDC*

May 14, 1962

**MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE with Former President
(General) Eisenhower**

Gettysburg Farm, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
0915, Sunday, May 13, 1962

OTHERS PRESENT: Secretary of Defense McNamara
Director of Central Intelligence John McCone
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
General Lemnitzer
Mr. David Smith, CIA
Lt. Colonel John S. D. Eisenhower

Secretary McNamara opened by telling President Eisenhower that President Kennedy had desired him to be briefed by himself and by General Lemnitzer, as those two officials had just returned from an extensive tour of the Far East and Middle East. The main subject was the rather grim situation in Southeast Asia.

General Lemnitzer then showed General Eisenhower a map of Laos showing the zones occupied by opposing forces at this time. Essentially the Pathet Lao hold the spine of mountains running northwest and southeast from Attapeu to Xieng Khouang. In addition they hold the provinces of Sam Neua, Phong Saly and Nam Tha. There is an island of Pathet Lao activity adjacent to Vientiane and Luang Prabang is practically surrounded. With the exception of the recent loss of Nam Tha, this is essentially the line which had been held at the time of the cease fire nearly a year ago.

The briefing at first centered around the recent battle of Nam Tha, which had been a serious loss for the Royal Lao Army. General Phoumi had committed eight battalions to that position, similar in some aspects to Dien Bien Phu, in that it sat in a dish, with the surrounding higher ground left for occupation by the enemy. The Pathet Lao forces at this battle were estimated by Marshal Sarit of Thailand to be 12 battalions; General Tucker, our Chief of MAAG, however, estimated Pathet Lao forces as closer to 6 battalions.

~~SECRET~~

Copy 2

~~SECRET~~

- 2 -

Obviously there are Vietminh forces engaged on the side of Pathet Lao (estimated 30,000) who are handling at least the artillery and the mortars. This is concluded because of the high degree of accuracy of the mortar and artillery fire and the high degree of coordination between the artillery and infantry troops. It is estimated that there are 1,000 Chinese Communists in addition to the Vietminh in Northern Laos.

The 8 battalions of General Phoumi had largely escaped as individuals. However, they lost all their guns, mortars and other heavy equipment, and came out only with their small arms. In addition, they came out as individuals and must be regrouped, reorganized and probably retrained, before they are fit once more for combat. General Eisenhower commented that it is axiomatic that when an army loses its guns it has taken a real licking. He also mentioned his experience as President in trying to dissuade the French from taking up the position at Dien Bien Phu, which later proved to be so disastrous. In answer to General Eisenhower's question, Mr. Smith said that the main difference between the performance of the Pathet Lao and the Royal Laotian Army was leadership and duration of training. The Pathet Lao have within their ranks a hard core of die-hard, professional communists to give some spine to their units. One of the difficulties in Northern Laos according to General Lemnitzer is that historically the populations of the Tonkin River Delta, being the strong people of Indochina, have tended to dominate the other peoples of Indochina including particularly those of Northern Laos.

General Phoumi still has some 70,000 troops available to him. However, he has been badly hurt by the loss of the artillery, by the loss of effectiveness in these 8 battalions which were of his best, and by the loss in morale. Apparently there is only one road out of the town of Nam Tha and the generals led the retreat. Some of the problem up to this time, according to General Lemnitzer, has been the difficulty in the past with the French obstructing our efforts to train the Laotians. Only in the last year have our advisers been allowed to put on uniforms and admit they are members of the military. It was noted that we have had difficulties with the French in this regard all along. They have always dragged their feet, feeling their prestige was at stake, with disastrous results.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

- 3 -

The discussion then turned to the situation in adjoining countries, Thailand and South Vietnam. The Thais are actually in rather poor condition to defend along the Mekong River. Marshal Sarit is primarily concerned with the area in the North just across the river from the area occupied by Pathet Lao. His troops were not so well organized as might be. General Eisenhower asked if they were not more war-like than the Laotians; General Lemnitzer said they were but that this is taking a rather low standard. Mr. McCone pointed out that the Siamese have been noted through the centuries as compromisers. The situation in South Vietnam is more encouraging however. Both General Lemnitzer and Secretary McNamara said that great improvement had been affected there in a rather short period of time. In the 90 days since General Harkins has been on the spot U. S. forces have increased from 800 to 8,000. One of the effective means by which we help the Vietnamese is by provision of helicopters, of which we have four companies in South Vietnam -- three Army and one Marine. It should not be surmised, however, from the fact that we have some momentum in Vietnam, that the war will be over in any short period of time. For one thing, the Viet Cong represent the best jungle army in the world in Mr. Smith's opinion. They are well organized and are entrenched well in various spots throughout South Vietnam. 60 Viet Cong radio stations communicating with the Vietminh have been identified. On the other hand, the area Soc Trang, the tip of Cochin China, which has been under control of the Vietminh for some 15 or 20 years is now in the process for the first time of being cleared out. Mr. McNamara spoke in warm terms of a Father Hui*, a former Chinese clergyman who has taken up arms to end the terror in this region.

There followed then some discussion of the leadership in the three countries. The four prominent persons in Laos at this time are Prince Boun Oum, the Head of the Royal Laotian Government, and his military commander, General Phoumi. Opposing Prince Boun Oum, according to Mr. McCone, is Prince Souvannaphong, a Communist. The so-called compromise, is Prince Souvanna Phouma, allegedly a neutralist but such an opportunist that he will take any side which seems to be winning -- at this time his estimate is that the Communists have the decided advantage.

* Father Nguyen Lao Hoa, who has 1200 men under him.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

- 4 -

The cease-fire which was agreed to nearly a year ago was based on the assumption that a neutral government would be established in Laos headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma, who is, incidentally, a half-brother of Prince Souvannaphong. General Phoumi, even though he is known as Boun Oum's "strong man," is actually, in Mr. McNamara's estimate, a weak reed. In addition, he himself is demoralized and has filled his top echelons of his Army during the last year with political appointees, subordinating military consideration to the political. These people are inefficient and are hurting the effectiveness of his army. Marshal Sarit is a stronger man, but is playing matters close to his chest. Surprisingly enough he has not been demanding U. S. troops to come into Thailand. Of the leaders of the three nations, Diem is by far the toughest. General Eisenhower commented that General Mike O'Daniel had informed him that the only ones who could talk to Diem are his brothers. General Lemnitzer confirmed this, but said the situation has been much improved, Diem being fairly close to General Harkins and Ambassador Nolting.

Current actions include a conference which will be held tomorrow with Marshal Sarit, in which it will be suggested to him that he request two U. S. ground units to come to Thailand on a SEATO exercise. One of these is a battle group to be located in Central Thailand and the other would be a Marine battalion landing team to be located along the Southeastern section. These would be supported by some air units. The addition of these units might make it possible for Sarit to reinforce the Northern border which he is concerned about, and it is hoped that they will also provide a hard core to give confidence to the rest of the Thai Army.

In South Vietnam, where it has been noted that things are going better, the current task is to protect the villages where the losses to the Viet Cong are highest. The first move is to make hedgehogs of these villages so they can protect themselves, after which the Vietnamese Army will be able to move out and try to stamp out Viet Cong resistance. General Lemnitzer mentioned a training center in South Vietnam which looks like a small Fort Benning. He himself has been delighted with the performance of the U. S. officers there and said that President Eisenhower should be proud of their accomplishments. It was noted, in contrast to the Laotians, that Vietnamese forces seemed to be willing to fight.

~~SECRET~~

General Eisenhower asked whether military planning is covering expansion of the war, with possible threat of hitting Communist Vietnam with U. S. air. He reminded the group of the measures he, himself, had taken to end the Korean War by letting it be known that the Yalu River no longer would comprise a privileged sanctuary for Chinese airfields and that if we hit targets in Communist China, we would not be limited in the weapons we used. He observed that very shortly thereafter the Chinese had signed an armistice in Korea. He further expressed some astonishment at the way the British have cleared out of this entire region, and expressed the private opinion that he did not think the British would fight even for Hong Kong.

Discussion then turned to future actions. Mr. McCone expressed the view that if the conference with Sarit is successful permitting us to place some U. S. units in Thailand, then regarding Laos there are three courses of action. One would be partition, which would give northern Laos to the Pathet Lao and attempt to hold the South at least as far north as the 17th Parallel; the second course, more difficult would be to reconstruct the Laotian Army and encourage the Laotians to continue fighting; the final action, and most extreme, would be the commitment of our own forces in Laos.

President Eisenhower said he did not think our choice need be so clean cut. He thought we might be able to strengthen Thailand and South Vietnam and thereby hold the shoulders of Laos. Then, in concert with Vietnam and Thailand we could decide what line must be held and train and aid the Laotians to hold that particular line. Finally, of course, we would attempt to shove the line back northward. General Eisenhower feels that the line must reach at least to the 17th Parallel latitude, even though he recognizes that the tops of the mountains in the area are currently in Pathet Lao control. The line should run along the Mekong River to insure that Thailand is safe. He mentioned the possibility of a government in exile, since he and General Lemnitzer are agreed that for the time being at least, Northern Laos cannot be cleared out. He said there is a difference between taking responsibility for the restoration of Laos and finding a line to hold to protect Thailand. He further observed that no country can be saved unless it wants to be saved. Both Mr. McCone and Secretary McNamara agreed on the principle of holding the shoulders by strengthening Thailand and South Vietnam.

~~SECRET~~

- 6 -

Mr. McCone mentioned a problem prevalent in all Southeast Asia, the presence of so many overseas Chinese. In Bangkok, for example, almost all the banks and merchandising are in Chinese hands. General Eisenhower agreed, but said that Chiang thinks he still has the loyalty of the overseas Chinese. Furthermore the Chinese are noted for their habits of expediency. General Lemnitzer agreed that Chiang thinks he still has the loyalty of the overseas Chinese; however, nobody addressed the problem of whether this is actually a fact.

Once more the subject turned to the leadership in Laos, and Mr. Smith, who is well acquainted with all three Princes involved as well as General Phoumi, said there is not much to work with in the whole "greasy deck of cards." At this General Eisenhower suggested the German trick of flattering the high-ranking incompetent by making him the "great commander-in-chief," meanwhile providing a Chief of Staff such as Ludendorff and Moltke to actually run things. He thought it might be possible to make Phoumi the General-in-Chief but to provide a U. S. Chief of Staff. This suggestion seemed to meet with some enthusiasm, particularly from Mr. McCone.

It was noted that the Communists are clever in limiting their actions to those calculated not to provoke retaliation. For example, Castro has been smart enough not to attack Guantanamo (somewhat to our regret) and Red China has been smart enough not to attack Formosa. President Eisenhower asked General Lemnitzer about the possibility of the Philippines providing some troops. General Lemnitzer said that the Philippine Army appears to him to have gone native and is backsliding. This seemed to disappoint General Eisenhower somewhat.

The main conclusions of the conference were: (a) that the best strategy in this area would be to beef up the two shoulders, Thailand and South Vietnam, and concentrate on making sure they do not fall, at the same time defining a line across Laos, probably at the 17th Parallel, which must by all means be held, thus creating a line which runs along the 17th Parallel and up the Mekong River. (b) That the possibility of a U. S. Chief of Staff to General Phoumi might be considered. (c) That General Eisenhower would try to keep the Republicans in the Senate from becoming Generals and publicly second-guessing and looking over the shoulder of President Kennedy in his conduct of our affairs in Southeast Asia.

At this point the meeting wound up on a cordial note.

~~SECRET~~