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Source: *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, July 2023, Vol. 38, No. 2 (July 2023), pp. 286-319

Published by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27219725>

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Sibling Rivalry: The Correspondence of Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, Familial Relations and Royal Lao Involvement in the American Bombing of Laos during the Second Indochina War

Ryan Wolfson-Ford

This research note presents research into nearly forty letters contained in the private diaries of Souvanna Phouma held at the Library of Congress. The newly uncovered letters, covering 1964–70, offer unprecedented insight into a divisive and volatile chapter in relations between princely half-brothers Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, leading figures on opposing sides in Cold War Laos. As the largest bombing campaign per capita in history unfolded, these letters show how the fraternal link between the two leaders did not ameliorate the conflict, as in the past, but contributed to a breakdown in their correspondence. To the degree that they had influence over events, the squabbling half-brothers, each entrenched in his own ideological belief, prolonged the Second Indochina War in Laos by failing to negotiate. More broadly, this note argues that the Royal Lao Government (RLG) played a major role in the US bombing of Laos. Souvanna, as RLG prime minister and minister of defence, was a central figure in this collaboration, which also contributed to the interruption of the correspondence between the two princes.

Keywords: Laos, Second Indochina War, US bombing of Laos, Lao agency, New Cold War Studies.

This research note presents correspondence between Royal Lao Government (RLG) prime minister and minister of defence Prince Souvanna Phouma and Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong. Exchanged at the height of the Second Indochina War in Laos

(1959–75), the letters reveal deteriorating relations between the two men—half-brothers from a branch of the Luang Prabang royal family—while elucidating the deeply rooted nature of the conflict between the Pathet Lao and the RLG (Evans 2010, pp. 267–300). They provide an entry point into the reasoning, understandings, conceptions and mental states of both leaders in vivid detail, in the expressive, telling language of their own privately exchanged words.¹ This has important bearing on current historical understanding of the Second Indochina War in Laos, which can be studied in new ways with reference to New Cold War Studies (Westad 2005; Hack and Wade 2009; Vu 2009). The correspondence reveals how personal the war had become for both men and how they were driven by personal sentiment as much as by rational political stances and *realpolitik*. It was not just a platonic exchange between two leaders across an ideological divide, nor even just the verbal sparring of two warring sides, but registered on a deeply personal level signalled by insults, death threats and other vicious personal attacks. The correspondence also offers new insight into the US bombing of Laos, particularly on previously unknown and unsettling personal interactions between Lao wartime leaders directly involved in the campaign.

The correspondence is unique for offering a new cache of primary sources of Lao historical actors, wartime leaders and statesmen. These sources are unedited, unfiltered by foreign diplomats, and feature private, behind-the-scenes correspondence not meant for public consumption. This note draws primarily on Souvanna Phouma's personal diaries held at the Library of Congress, and secondarily on documents from the US National Archives at College Park, Maryland (Wolfson-Ford 2018).² In those diaries, one finds a large number of annexed documents from telegrams, correspondence, newspaper clippings and communiqués, to internal RLG documents like memoranda, intelligence reports and military briefings. These appended documents are invaluable because RLG archival documents are not reliably accessible anywhere in the world. Moreover, Souvanna seems to have saved only those documents that were associated with the most important events. Thus, using Souvanna's diaries, one can

see the origins of the US bombing campaign in the first half of 1964. It is an important new source for modern Lao history that scholars can use in a wide variety of research programmes.

There are thirty-six letters in total in the correspondence between Souvanna and Souphanouvong, eight of which Souvanna wrote and twenty-eight of which Souphanouvong wrote; three of Souphanouvong's letters were written not to Souvanna, but to King Savang Vatthana—although Souvanna obtained copies. The correspondence—nearly all of which was in French, save for a few letters in Lao—is contained within the ten volumes comprising Souvanna's diaries, spanning from 1 January 1961 to 31 December 1970. The earliest letter is from 10 October 1963, but the bulk of the correspondence starts with a letter from 19 July 1964 and continues until 7 December 1970. The correspondence likely continued beyond 7 December 1970, but the Library of Congress does not hold Souvanna's diaries after 1970. The library originally obtained Souvanna's diaries on loan from his daughter Moune Stieglitz and copied them onto six microfilm reels in 1982–86.³ People mentioned in the diaries include King Savang Vatthana, Prince Boun Oum, Royal Lao Army (RLA) generals Phoumi Nosavan, Vang Pao, Kongle and Siho Lamphouthacoul, RLA colonel Bounleut Saycocie, RLG minister Sisouk Na Champassak, Soviet foreign minister Andreï Andreevich Gromyko, US diplomat W. Averell Harriman, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) president Hồ Chí Minh, Cambodian leader Norodom Sihanouk and US presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, among others. Events contained in the diaries that are profitable for future research include the Geneva Conference of 1961–62, the second coalition government's formation and unravelling, the origins of the US bombing campaign and RLG involvement in it, infighting among the neutralists, the RLG's liberal democracy and elections, foreign relations of the RLG, and developments in the Second Indochina War.

Some background on Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong is useful. The two half-brothers came from a branch of the Luang Prabang royal family, and were sons of Prince Boun Khong, the

viceroys, or “second king”. They both attended elite schools in France before returning to work in the French colonial administration. They each joined the Lao independence movement, the Lao Issara (1945–49), at the end of the Second World War, but had a falling out in 1949 when Souphanouvong broke away to form the DRV-allied Pathet Lao to fight the French, while Souvanna accepted French amnesty and returned to Laos, rising to high political office. In 1957, Souvanna, as RLG prime minister, negotiated a political settlement with the Pathet Lao led by Souphanouvong, leading to the first coalition government (1957–58). After this collapsed, Souvanna again resumed negotiations with Souphanouvong during the Kongle Coup (August–December 1960) and the Geneva Conference of 1961–62, which led to a second coalition government. This is important historical context for the correspondence (1964–c.1970). By the time of the first letter on 19 July 1964, serious fighting had already broken out between the RLG and Pathet Lao (and neutralist forces allied to each), and the US bombing campaign had begun only weeks earlier on 21 May 1964.

What is in the letters? They contain appeals for reviving stalled peace talks, which ultimately failed to materialize. They recount the horrors of the early bombing campaign, including repeated pleas by Souphanouvong for Souvanna to end the bombing. They include debates on the nature of the war, the ideological stances of both Souvanna and Souphanouvong, and the legitimacy of each other’s governments. But crucially, they include bitter recriminations, insults, incitements, manipulations and even death threats. The letters are pervaded by a sense of betrayal and rivalry as the earlier close political alliance between the two brothers crumbled. Thus, the brothers argued over who was the “true” or “authentic” neutralist leader. They each accused the other of being pawns of foreign powers, US or DRV, and Souphanouvong blamed Souvanna for personally authorizing the bombing. Given how long Souvanna had worked to avoid war and how he insisted on secrecy about the US bombing of Laos, Souphanouvong’s accusation must have been quite upsetting.⁴ Towards the end of the highly divisive

letters, Souphanouvong himself referred to “an undesired tension” and misunderstanding (in letters from February and April 1966) and noted the two men’s relations had “deteriorated” (May 1967) before the letters ceased completely from April 1968 to April 1970. The letters before the breakdown (Souvanna’s 18 February 1966 letter and Souphanouvong’s 13 May 1967 letter) contain some of the strongest condemnations.

One question that this note explores is to what extent did the familial relations of Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong shape the Second Indochina War in Laos? Did personal disputes unleashed by the exchange make peace talks impossible, possibly prolonging the war? Relations between the two men in these letters are in stark contrast to an earlier period of good familial relations, which led to peace talks and the first coalition government in 1957–58, and re-emerged during and after the Kongle Coup of 1960, even playing a role in the 1962 Geneva Accords (Tarling 2017, p. 12).⁵ During the bombing campaign, those same familial connections could no longer resolve the conflict and so thereby contributed to its continuation. By 1966–67, both men seemed to have hardened their stances because of strained relations as the familial connection soured.⁶ The most significant impact of the correspondence on the conflict was the failure of the two men to enter into peace negotiations. These negotiations were discussed in December 1964, not long after the US bombing campaign began, but failed to materialize. This failure to enter peace talks prolonged the war. Moreover, Souvanna ignored Souphanouvong’s pleas to end the bombing. The divisive nature of the letters eventually led to a breakdown when the correspondence stopped between April 1968 and April 1970. Certainly, other factors contributed to the poor communication found in the letters, including real political differences and the progress of the war, but the personal element was a factor, as was the unique personal dynamics and history of the two men. The letters could and did cause personal disputes precisely because of this.

The RLG's Role in the US Bombing Campaign and Lao Agency in the Cold War

Besides sibling relations, the key context for this correspondence was the emerging US bombing campaign of Laos. This was a major point of contention in the correspondence that is explored in detail below. Here some explanation is required before considering the correspondence itself. Not to be confused with earlier forays into air strikes tracing back to 1961, the US bombing campaign began on 21 May 1964, initially as “armed reconnaissance” with US pilots (US Air Force, Navy, Air America) flying RLAFF-marked (Royal Lao Air Force) aircraft, and continued until the 21 February 1973 peace accords. However, what is not commonly known is that the Lao civilian and military leadership opposing the Pathet Lao played a major role in the campaign. Indeed, in a letter written in July 1964, not long after the campaign began, Souphanouvong accused Souvanna of being personally responsible for ordering the US bombing campaign. As prime minister and minister of defence of the RLG, Souvanna Phouma not only authorized the US bombing, and so shares responsibility for it, but was indispensable to it and shaped key parts of it.⁷ He was directly involved in its daily operations: targeting, rules of engagement, areas of bombardment, armament, planes, pilots, air bases, logistics, training, and planning (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 356–82; Anthony and Sexton 1993, pp. 117, 120, 123, 139, 144, 146–47, 154, 156, 159–60, 163 and 181). It was also Souvanna who demanded the whole campaign be conducted in strict secrecy, even though US officials said this was impossible. Souvanna and the RLG civilian and military leadership believed they had no choice but to appeal to the US to defend their country through a massive, catastrophic bombing campaign.⁸ The RLG leaders sought to stop what they saw as an overwhelming DRV-led invasion threatening to overthrow the government and conquer the country.⁹ They fought to defend the liberal democracy they had built since 1945, and to defend a future free from communism (Wolfson-Ford 2018).

The proximate cause for Souvanna's hugely important decision to authorize a US bombing campaign was the devastating Pathet Lao–People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) advances against the RLG-allied neutralist forces. These advances had continued unabated since November 1962 and nearly swept those latter forces from the strategically important Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang, a province in eastern Laos, by May 1964.¹⁰ A year before he authorized the US bombing campaign, Souvanna agreed to a transfer of US warplanes to the RLAF. Even then, US ambassador Leonard Unger noted,

[Souvanna] now appears to entertain seriously the idea that the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and Chinese communists may not intend that there be serious negotiations for peace in Laos but are bent sooner or later on war and [occupying the] entire country. (Anthony and Sexton 1993, p. 96)

But Souvanna seems only to have finally changed his mind at a dinner party with Western diplomats, including Unger, on 19 May 1964: “To their surprise, Souvanna began speaking “in stinging terms” of a Pathet Lao betrayal and the losses suffered by neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars” (*ibid.*, p. 102). Souvanna was frustrated by the Pathet Lao's and Soviet Union's responses to his protests of these attacks, saying Souphanouvong had flatly denied them, while the Soviet ambassador refused to act. “Several times Souvanna said it seemed to him that force was all that was left. He became so distraught that he pointedly asked Unger what was the [US] waiting for. Why didn't it bomb North Vietnam and China?” (*ibid.*). At the same time, the US was also evaluating the situation. It saw that air power was necessary to support the RLA, but that the new RLAF was ineffective (*ibid.*, pp. 95–96).¹¹ President Lyndon Johnson and his advisors wanted to begin US armed reconnaissance missions, and “Everyone agreed [that] Souvanna's permission was required before such a mission could be flown” (*ibid.*, pp. 110–11).¹²

The US bombing of Laos had enormous consequences (Channapha and Russell 2009; Vatthana 2010; Branfman 2011). Laos continues to suffer from the effects of the bombing to this day, nearly sixty

years after it began. But most of the public and scholarly community remain unaware of the role of the RLG in the US bombing campaign. The US could not have undertaken the campaign without explicit approval from the RLG. There is a memo to this effect dated 21 May 1964, providing RLG authorization to carry out the campaign (Wolfson-Ford 2018, p. 355).¹³ Souvanna's main concern was the fighting around the Plain of Jars, but when the campaign expanded to interdict PAVN forces along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, a series of logistical and supply routes used by the DRV in the war that ran through Laos, Souvanna gave his approval (Anthony and Sexton 1993, p. 163). As US ambassador William Sullivan reminded his superiors on 22 March 1965,

RLG approval was needed for new programs and for the United States to attack new targets.... Laotian national interests and conditions, as interpreted by Souvanna, took precedence. On occasion, the US might have to sacrifice military opportunities or temper them to the political climate. Air power in Laos would in every instance have to operate within this framework. (ibid., p. 160)

Thus, the RLG was formally within the chain of authorizations needed for air operations (ibid., p. 156). Souvanna could and did stop the bombing; he had power to do that (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 370–72, 374).¹⁴ When civilians died in bombings, both he and King Savang Vatthana told Sullivan the campaign must continue; it was too important to stop. When the US mistakenly hit Khangkhay, the main Pathet Lao-controlled town in Xieng Khouang, “Both Souvanna and Unger agreed hitting Khangkhay was regrettable, but they also agreed that the [RLG] need not apologize for carrying the war to the Pathet Lao” (Anthony and Sexton 1993, p. 115). Not long after the bombing began, King Savang Vatthana “told the prime minister in no uncertain terms that [the US armed reconnaissance flights] must continue” (ibid., p. 116). The RLG leadership made choices. They had a major role in events that by its neglect has distorted our understanding of the Second Indochina War in Laos. More broadly,

the RLG charted its own course in the Cold War, reminding us of the importance of the local dynamics of the global Cold War.¹⁵ Only when we account for the RLG's agency to shape major events in Cold War Laos like the US bombing campaign can we begin to better understand the conflict. I do not argue that US responsibility for the bombing of Laos is in any way diminished; but I do argue that the RLG shares responsibility given its involvement, and its role cannot be omitted as is often the case.

Souvanna's greatest influence over the US bombing campaign was his demand that it be done secretly. He forced US officials to lie to the world, even though the evidence for the campaign was glaring. Souvanna agreed to US armed reconnaissance, "but vigorously insisted Washington not publicly state it was sending fighters.... The less said about all this the better. It was wiser to adopt the communist tactics of denial even lying, if need be" (Anthony and Sexton 1993, p. 111). Ambassador Sullivan complained to Washington that Souvanna forced him to "behave just like the DRV ambassador and deny it all" (Wolfson-Ford 2018, p. 367). Indeed, it got to the point that when journalists asked President Johnson on 15 January 1965 about news reports of US bombing in Laos, even he had to lie. "The President would only comment that it was public knowledge the United States was helping the Royal Laotian Government defend itself", but he declined to discuss the details (Anthony and Sexton 1993, p. 150). Souvanna's demand for secrecy was motivated partly by his desire to maintain his image as the Lao neutralist leader, which was a point he and Souphanouvong bitterly argued about in their correspondence. Indeed, Souvanna and Souphanouvong were rivals for leadership of the neutralists in Laos. But he also likely took inspiration from the DRV, which had been intervening on Lao territory with impunity while denying it for well over a decade (Goscha 2004; Brown and Zasloff 1984; Goscha 2016, pp. 307–8). It appears Souvanna may well have thought it was time the RLG did the same and fought fire with fire. Elsewhere, Sullivan explained Souvanna's need for secrecy.

As long as Souvanna could keep up this public posture, he would have the continued support ... of the Soviet Union.... If this was ever admitted, Sullivan was sure the Russians would denounce Souvanna and perhaps break off relations. Worse, the North Vietnamese might invade Laos in full force and overrun the country. (Anthony and Sexton 1993, p. 157)

When reading telegram exchanges with US ambassadors Unger and Sullivan about the bombing campaign, Souvanna was always concerned not to bomb Khangkhay in Xieng Khouang, the principal Pathet Lao city. He ensured it was off limits. But when it was hit accidentally by US planes, Souvanna demanded a damage report (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 373–74).¹⁶ One can see now Souvanna must have feared harming Souphanouvong, who was there on the ground. In fact, Souphanouvong's house in Khangkhay was bombed not long after the US bombing campaign began. The exchange of letters preserved in Souvanna's diaries contain unique information about both men not available from other sources, but also preserves a harrowing story of two half-brothers on opposite sides in a brutal war.

Past Good Relations between Souvanna and Souphanouvong

The correspondence between Souvanna and Souphanouvong documents a new, divisive and volatile chapter in the relations between the two half-brothers. Before this exchange, they had a history of good relations and very public political alliances.¹⁷ Thus they could finally broker an agreement in November 1957 between the Pathet Lao and the RLG after years of failure in negotiations since the Geneva Accords of 1954 that ended the First Indochina War. Describing their relationship, Martin Stuart-Fox writes about “a belief that he, Suvanna, could always come to an acceptable agreement with his half-brother, Suphanouvong, whom he refused to think of as a communist” (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 93). Michael Field, a British journalist in Laos in the 1960s, wrote about Souvanna's negotiations with Souphanouvong: “In this he [Souvanna] had a unique advantage, since Prince Souphanouvong was his half-brother. From so close

a relative he expected and received preferential treatment” (Field 1965, p. 49). This close relationship was the reason that Souvanna managed to secure an agreement with Souphanouvong that led to the first coalition government in late 1957. It surfaced again during the Kongle Coup (August–December 1960), when Souvanna once again initiated negotiations with the Pathet Lao, this time via Prince Souphanouvong’s wife, whom he had given a job at Air Laos (*ibid.*, pp. 92–93, 98). And in February 1961, Field witnessed another display of their close relations when Souvanna made a visit to Souphanouvong on the Plain of Jars. Having observed a Lao *baci* ceremony, he described the dynamic between the two men.

The two princes and their chief followers sat in a circle on the floor around the *phakouan*. . . . His [Souvanna’s] photograph hung on the wall beside those of Prince Souphanouvong and King Savang Vatthana. . . . Cotton strings . . . were knotted around [Souvanna’s] wrists . . . also to remind him of the eternal friendship now sworn between him and his pro-Communist half-brother. (*ibid.*, p. 119)

Such political alliances traced back to the brothers’ days in the Lao Issara independence movement, although there had been prior discord too. Clearly, after 1962 the war and political disagreements harmed relations, but the history of the two men came into play in their correspondence, which by 1964 was burdened with a sense of betrayal and rivalry. Finally, we must keep in mind that the brothers’ history of good relations did become a factor again towards the end of the war, helping to secure a third coalition government and the 21 February 1973 peace treaty.

How to Restore Peace and the Failure to Resume Talks

The remainder of this article will examine the correspondence of Souvanna and Souphanouvong, starting with one of the most pressing issues: how to restore peace.¹⁸ Souphanouvong repeatedly sought to hold talks with Souvanna Phouma. His letter of 3 December 1964 lamented how various forces kept the two men from talking. He wrote of how they had tried to negotiate in Paris in September, but

failed. And he noted that the dispute over where to host meetings in Laos “interrupted negotiations for a long time”.¹⁹ Much of this letter from Souphanouvong blames Souvanna for failing to meet for negotiations. Souphanouvong derived from this that Souvanna was not neutral in as much as Souvanna was pursuing war and not peace. He asserted that it was only thanks to the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS)—as Souphanouvong called his movement, more commonly known as the “Pathet Lao”—that negotiations happened, and that whatever success they had was due to the NLHS. An important context that Souphanouvong did not mention, but about which Souvanna later complained in the correspondence, was the frequent small-scale “nibbling” attacks the Pathet Lao–DRV undertook from July 1962 to May 1964. In Souvanna’s eyes, these attacks repeatedly violated the 1962 Geneva Accords and made the second coalition’s functioning impossible.

In his letter of 3 December 1964, Souphanouvong accused Souvanna of not wanting to talk. Commenting on Souvanna’s decision not to meet in Paris, Souphanouvong wrote: “This is the truth: it clearly shows who is motivated by goodwill, who is not, who wants to negotiate, who does not.” Souphanouvong wrote separately to King Savang Vatthana in a letter dated 8 February 1965, calling for the US to stop intervening in Laos and “let the Lao settle their own affairs”.²⁰ And in a letter of 10 May 1965 to Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong wrote that it was the NLHS who followed the agreements. In Souphanouvong’s mind, the war broke out because the Lao right wing (by which he meant the RLG) did not follow the agreements. In his 3 December 1964 letter, Souphanouvong claimed that the NLHS were the peacemakers, while the US and the RLG made war: “although the American imperialists and their lackeys are torpedoing negotiations, unleashing furious military attacks ... the NLHS nevertheless resolutely maintains its position of settling all problems by means of peaceful negotiations”. At this early point in the correspondence, the exchange could continue despite recriminations, rhetoric and bluster. Eventually, as the correspondence wore on for several more years, resentment about

this aspect of the correspondence would grow and contribute to its interruption in April 1968. But at this point in the exchange of letters, Souphanouvong was still intent on reviving talks, offering serious proposals to that end. He appealed to Souvanna in a way that must have carried weight in the past, writing, “Apart from this peaceful and negotiated solution there is no other.” It is telling that no peace talks emerged from the correspondence, indicating a new more divisive phase in the brothers’ relations as well as a more intense period in the RLG–Pathet Lao war.

Souvanna did not save as many of his own letters in his diaries. One of the few letters that he did keep was from 15 March 1965, when he wrote to Souphanouvong requesting an immediate ceasefire as a prerequisite to talks. “I renew to you my urgent appeal for a general, sincere and controlled ceasefire between the three [i.e., right, left and neutral] Lao armed forces.” He noted that there were many violations of the 1962 Geneva Accords by the Pathet Lao and the “Vietminh” (meaning PAVN), recalling attacks against neutralist forces in 1962–63: “the responsibility for these repeated violations of the agreement lies entirely with the NLHS”. However, in the same letter, Souvanna did offer to resume talks in Vientiane, even offering the International Control Commission (ICC) to provide security for Souphanouvong. Souvanna then added, “Our position therefore remains in complete harmony with the principles of the 1962 agreements and internal agreements.” A shorter letter from 26 February 1965 was even more emphatic. Souvanna wrote that conditions were good for a ceasefire, and one must be agreed upon and immediately implemented because “Indochinese events could at any time become extremely dangerous”. He called on Souphanouvong to agree to a tripartite ceasefire that he said would lead to talks in Vientiane. He spoke of practical, frank solutions: “I am making this proposal to you, asking you to consider it with the greatest attention, regardless of any idea other than that of arriving at a concrete solution.”

Yet, the very question of peace led to arguments over who was the true neutralist leader.²¹ Both brothers were rivals for leadership of the neutralist movement in Laos. Various passages from the

correspondence show this. In a draft letter dated 24 May 1964 (three days after ordering the US bombing campaign), Souvanna wrote to the 1962 Geneva Accords co-chairman, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union stating that he as prime minister was one “whose neutralist sentiments cannot be suspected”, thereby claiming to be the neutralist leader in Laos.²² This set the stage for an argument in a letter between the two brothers. In a letter written to Souvanna, Souphanouvong signed his name as the leader of the “authentic” neutralist forces. Responding to this in a letter dated 7 September 1964, Souvanna wrote to Souphanouvong saying,

It would be a big mistake on your part to believe that through my position as prime minister and minister of national defence I have become ... the leader of the Right Party.... I am and remain a neutralist. I defend the interests and aspirations of all those who seek the Happiness and Prosperity of Laos in Neutrality, Independence, and Sovereignty. I therefore categorically reject the appellation of “authentic neutralist forces” that you claim to apply to the elements that you have managed to mislead by unfair manoeuvres.

By this time, the brothers’ rivalry for leadership of the neutralists intensified as the neutralists split into “patriotic neutralist forces” aligned with Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao on the one hand and the RLG-backed force of about ten thousand soldiers commanded by Kongle and supported by Souvanna (Wolfson-Ford 2018, p. 329). The question of the brothers’ relative position in the divided neutralist movement was sensitive enough that it could overshadow other concerns about peace talks and the wider war. This explains why Souvanna insisted on secrecy of the US bombing campaign as a non-negotiable condition he imposed on the US—to maintain, untarnished, his claim to be the neutralist leader. This also explains why Souvanna was so upset by Souphanouvong for using the title “leader of the authentic neutralist forces”. Finally, what seems to have pushed Souvanna to call for the US bombing campaign was the defeat of Kongle’s neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars on 16 May 1964. These forces were closely allied to Souvanna and were

fighting the “patriotic neutralist forces” allied to Souphanouvong. So, instead of talking about how to resume peace negotiations, the brothers argued about titles of leadership of the neutralists. The correspondence here was deeply personal given that it imperilled such important discussions as how to resume peace talks.

On-the-ground Realities: Souphanouvong’s Early Accounts of and Pleas to End the US Bombing Campaign

Some of the most important and harrowing evidence preserved in the letters are early accounts by Souphanouvong of the devastation the US bombing campaign was causing. Less than two months after it commenced, Souphanouvong wrote Souvanna a letter of 19 July 1964 saying the US and RLG had “totally destroyed the Government of National Unity, shattered the Geneva Accords ... and sent American planes daily to bomb, machine gun and spray toxic chemicals in order to massacre the Lao population”. He continued that the US and RLG “want to start a full-scale war”. Souphanouvong added that if the bombing continued, the Pathet Lao would earn the sympathy of the population because of the collateral damage and the many innocent civilians caught up in the bombing.

In a letter dated 3 December 1964, Souphanouvong noted the extent of the damage caused by the US bombing after the first six months.

These large-scale attacks on areas under NLHS control have caused serious loss of life and property to our people. According to provisional figures, hundreds of civilians have been killed or injured, hundreds of residential houses, public buildings and temples have been destroyed, countless numbers of buffaloes, oxen, pigs, chickens, and crops have been lost to the planes, guns and tanks of the US imperialists and the right wing.

Separately, Souphanouvong wrote to the king on 8 February 1965 about the devastation caused by the bombing. He said one cause of the escalation of the war was the “destructive raids by American planes against our peaceful population”. Thus, he appealed for peace:

“the American imperialists and their lackeys must ... immediately cease all attacks and all air raids against areas under the control of the NLHS...”. Likewise, in a letter to Souvanna from 10 May 1965, Souphanouvong wrote that in order to hold talks Souvanna must end the US bombing “and more particularly put an immediate end to all air raids”.²³

Souphanouvong bore witness to the death and destruction unleashed by the US bombing campaign in a letter from 6 March 1965, writing,

They [the US] have not ceased to send their planes taking off from their bases in South Vietnam and Thailand, and from their 7th Fleet to dump, together with the [RLAF], tens of thousands of tons of bombs on many villages, localities and roads in our liberated areas, causing countless damage in human lives and property to our compatriots.

And in a letter from 1 April 1966, Souphanouvong spoke of

intense day and night bombardment and strafing raids on all areas of the liberated zone, including the spraying of toxic chemicals, killing many innocent civilians, destroying pagodas, schools, hospitals and cultivated fields, with the most revolting barbarity.

Souphanouvong’s letters to Souvanna about the bombing were another highly divisive set of letters that ultimately contributed to the breakdown in their correspondence. Souphanouvong’s repeated pleas to end the bombing were flatly ignored by Souvanna. Souphanouvong tried to appeal to Souvanna’s pathos by including graphic details of the destruction the bombing was causing. The fact that Souphanouvong knew that Souvanna himself had personally ordered the US bombing made the betrayal all the more upsetting. For his part, Souvanna was clearly upset whenever Souphanouvong accused him of being responsible for the bombing. Yet the war of words would not have been felt so deeply if they did not have a shared history and familial ties and recent political alliances (now broken) as they did.

Personal Disputes in the Correspondence

One key facet found throughout the correspondence were the passages detailing how personally upset both men were stemming from the betrayal of their shared history and family ties as much as the war or political disagreements. In some cases, these personal relations were revealed because of the war itself. One example came in a letter Souphanouvong wrote to Souvanna dated 19 July 1964. After denying Souvanna's charges about PAVN involvement in a Pathet Lao offensive, Souphanouvong wrote,

I want you to know that if it really was the NLHS that harboured intentions of launching a large offensive to gain ground and completely annihilate your forces, as claimed by the slanders of the USA and the Lao right [the RLG], the capture of Muong Soi, Vang Vieng or other places would not be difficult and would not require anyone's help.

Souphanouvong bristled at Souvanna's claim of PAVN forces fighting to support the Pathet Lao. He added his frustration that the Pathet Lao had repeatedly proposed peace negotiations without success. Souvanna underlined this passage and marked it with a question mark. Souvanna also noted additional places then threatened by the Pathet Lao–PAVN forces in the margins of his brother's letter, underlining his own frustrations at the continued Pathet Lao–PAVN advances and his brother's inability to respond to his concerns about it.

One way in which Souphanouvong incited Souvanna was by personally accusing him of being responsible for the US bombing. In a letter from 19 July 1964, Souphanouvong wrote,

I have very certain information that You have given your consent to the [US bombing campaign].... In all this, You are their accomplice and You have contributed to making the situation in Laos more serious than ever.... However, You, who are a man able to think, instead of preventing them by all possible means, You have, on the contrary, shared their feelings and approved in one way or another of their actions. The Lao people cannot forgive you for this.

Souphanouvong's writing was deeply personal here. He accused Souvanna of ordering the murder, even "massacre", of the Lao people. He closed the letter by personally appealing to Souvanna to end the bombing.

I hope that upon receipt of this message, You will reflect well and take measures to prevent the launching by the US and its agents of the adventurous and dangerous operations of which I have just spoken. In case You are not able to prevent it, try by all means to save Yourself from their grip, so that in no case can they use Your personal name for the realization of their policy of aggression and treason...

Souphanouvong ended his 19 July 1964 letter with a threat for Souvanna that the US would "get rid of You" like other US Cold War clients in Southeast Asia, conjuring the fate of the recently assassinated Ngô Đình Diệm of the Republic of Vietnam. He repeated a similar death threat in a letter from 6 March 1965.

If you persist in following the old rut, harbouring the illusion of support of the Americans and the right-wing party, opposing your people and not desiring national harmony and unification, you will not be able to escape the fate reserved for the rotten lackeys of the Americans nor the responsibility for the very harmful consequences for our country and for yourself.

Souphanouvong was not above using emotional manipulation, from incitement to even death threats, to influence Souvanna. The two men were flawed human beings consumed by passions no different than anyone else in history. It is this evidence that adds a much-needed human dimension to historical accounts of the Second Indochina War in Laos. It seems Souvanna and Souphanouvong were not just rational actors, but also men influenced at times by their own unguarded, raw emotions. This question of emotional affect deserves further research.

The letters Souphanouvong and Souvanna exchanged were also mired in new clashes over the brothers' increasing political

differences, heightened again by personal and shared history. The restricted nature of the correspondence, in which each man had only a few pages at most to state their views, led to statements that were essentialized, boiled down to their utmost basic forms, furthering conflict rather than communication. Souphanouvong suggested this in a letter from 25 March 1965, when he wrote that because of the inherent limitations of telegrams, “I am limiting myself to defining my point of view on a certain number of essential points...”. Thus, in a letter dated 3 December 1964, Souphanouvong denied that the DRV had intervened in Laos: “it is only to cover and hide the interference and aggression of the American imperialists, the fact in itself having no basis”. Likewise, in a letter of 1 April 1966, he wrote that the DRV “has always proved, in words as in deeds, its respect and correct observance of the [1962 Geneva Accords]; it strictly respected the sovereignty, independence, peace and neutrality of Laos”. Given Souvanna’s own repeated assertions of PAVN involvement in the conflict, this issue was a source of misunderstanding and personal friction for both men and hampered other important discussions.

The political rhetoric highlighted sharply different views, but also worsened communication and inflamed tensions between the two men. Souphanouvong’s letters were full of rhetoric of “American imperialists and their lackeys”. He frequently reduced the RLG to the Lao right wing, which was inevitably doomed to serve as a lackey of the US. He even called Souvanna a US “mouthpiece” or “instrument”, an insult that was both personal and political. Thus, in a letter of 3 December 1964, Souphanouvong advised Souvanna to “no longer allow the American imperialists and the right to use you as an instrument in the service of the foreign aggressors against patriotic and peace-loving forces and personalities...”. And in another letter from 10 May 1965, he wrote that

For more than two years the American imperialists and the right-wing party have endeavoured to make you their mouthpiece to distort the truth, shamelessly slander the position, points of view

and good will of the NLHS and to slander even the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, our neighbour who has always supported the just struggle of our people.

Souphanouvong repeated such claims in his letter of 8 February 1965 to the king, writing: “the American imperialists have ... used Prince Souvanna Phouma as their mouthpiece...”. He also accused Souvanna of being one of the “servants of the Americans in Laos”. These statements show the substantial ideological disagreements between the two men, but also how communication broke down through personal attacks and recriminations. Souphanouvong’s insults portrayed Souvanna as nothing more than a pawn of the US and Lao anti-communists, having no agency whatsoever as their “instrument”, having no independent thoughts or speech as their “mouthpiece”, and having been duped to fall under their complete control. Yet Souphanouvong was also gravely upset whenever Souvanna mentioned DRV or PAVN roles in the military conflict. These issues of agency, foreign military forces on the Lao battlefield, and other forms of foreign influence, laced with personal insults, damaged relations between both men and was a major factor behind the stoppage of letters for two years, from April 1968 to April 1970.

One of the most serious breakdowns in communication came when Souphanouvong accused the RLG of not being a legitimate government since, from the Pathet Lao point of view, only the second coalition government was legitimate.²⁴ Souphanouvong railed against attempts by Souvanna, the king and others to revive the National Assembly, amend the constitution and begin to hold elections again. In a 10 May 1965 letter, Souphanouvong wrote,

the right-wing party and you yourself, obeying American orders, have played and continue to play the comedy of the so-called “constitutional measures”, by daring to push His Majesty the King to convene the so-called “national congress” which should approve certain “amendments to the Constitution” intended to allow the establishment of a new “National Assembly” and a new “Government”...

By the sheer number of quotation marks, Souphanouvong implied all these actions and entities were illegitimate.

Souphanouvong condemned it as “perfidy” to invite NLHS to participate in planned RLG elections:

I reaffirm here the vanity and uselessness of these ridiculous manoeuvres and actions of the Americans and their lackeys. Because, however treacherous they may be, they cannot deceive anyone, but will be vigorously denounced and condemned by national and international opinion.

He was particularly upset that the RLG had ruled the NLHS “a rebel in opposition to the Constitution, against the Sovereign...”. To him, the sole legitimate government was the second coalition government established by the 1962 Geneva Accords: “For this Government of National Union alone constitutes the legal Government of the Lao people; it alone is authorized to decide on all the important affairs of the Nation, including the question of general elections.” He continued,

As for the present authorities in Vientiane, which the NLHS considers to be illegal and a hundred per cent instrument in the service of the aggressor American imperialists, they have no capacity to represent the Lao people and, therefore, have no right to take on itself to organize “elections” or a “popular consultation” or anything similar.

To Souphanouvong, it was all null and void as well as illegal; views that Souvanna could never accept or agree with. Similarly, in a letter to Souvanna dated 6 March 1965, Souphanouvong, feeling threatened by the revival of liberal democracy, dismissed the RLG as a puppet.

If you persist, at the behest of the Americans and of the right, in giving birth through some political artifice to any puppet administration, you can be sure that the Lao people will only be able to consider it as an instrument at the service of the Americans to torpedo our country, leaving it without any value, and [they] will oppose it until the end.

Finally, in a letter from November 1966, Souphanouvong called on Souvanna to cancel the upcoming elections scheduled for 1 January 1967, calling them “entirely illegal, divisive and reactionary”.

Souphanouvong condemned the revival of liberal democracy in RLG territory because it offered much needed legitimacy while clearly offering something the Pathet Lao zone did not have: participatory democracy. For his part, in a letter of 15 March 1965, Souvanna countered that Souphanouvong could rejoin the cabinet if he was willing to come to Vientiane, while implying that the RLG could not be paralysed by absent ministers. Regarding elections and the constitutional amendment, Souvanna wrote,

The latest ministerial changes are constitutional. They are approved by the national assembly, and, by the highest authority of our country, by his majesty [the King] himself, the supreme guardian of our national constitution. No international agreement and no agreement between Lao can claim any supremacy [over these RLG institutions].

Souvanna Phouma did from time to time save some of his own letters. His letter of 18 February 1966 is a good example of a clear statement of his own political stance, boiled down to the essential aspects because of limitations of the exchange via telegrams. But it is a letter in which Souvanna denounced the Pathet Lao as a puppet of the DRV and whose mission to communize Laos was doomed to failure. Souvanna strongly condemned the Pathet Lao–PAVN campaigns for killing and massacring Lao by a predominantly Vietnamese-led force, showing how he viewed the conflict in racial terms (and how closely his views on the war had aligned with the Lao right wing). It is a clear example of a letter written later in the brothers’ correspondence that illustrates that meaningful dialogue or communication about vital issues related to the war was no longer possible, and that prospects for peace were dimming.

Souvanna began his letter by writing first that the war must be solved via an internal solution: “We agree on only one point: the Lao problem must be solved by the Lao themselves.” He added

that unlike Souphanouvong his own ideas were not from foreign countries: “It is always by virtue of this principle that I have acted during my political career, and now more than ever, without seeking ideological and dogmatic inspirations in other countries, near or far.” But Souvanna turned to embrace the stridently nationalist idea of a Lao race²⁵ then in vogue among the RLG elite to explain his rejection not only of foreign influence, but of communism promoted by the DRV specifically.

We [Lao] were born on a very old land. We have an admirable religion, revered by millions of human beings, a culture that is in many respects satisfactory. This is enough for me to believe that we can progress without destroying all of these values in the name of so-called historical determinisms [i.e., Marxism].

Here Souvanna explicitly rejected communism viewing it as a threat that would “destroy” Lao culture, religion and society as he knew it.

Next, Souvanna wrote that the RLG was already independent, and did not need to be liberated by the Pathet Lao or the DRV: “Our fight was over [on 19 July 1949].²⁶ We were independent.” But he noted the source of the conflict was the Pathet Lao’s refusal to acknowledge Lao independence: “The NLHS ... went on its way with foreigners, communists, to lead a communist revolution on the pretext of incomplete national independence.” Souvanna accused the Pathet Lao of being foreign and killing Lao, portraying the conflict as less about communism and more about Vietnamese domination of Lao and a Lao-Vietnamese war.

To achieve this end, the NLHS did not hesitate to tolerate foreign troops treading on our soil, fighting with their own troops, killing and massacring in at least three provinces ... brave Lao peasants who have never seen an “American imperialist” in their lives and have never heard of either Marx or Lenin.

Souvanna condemned the Pathet Lao for never separating from the DRV: “because it is its only chance not to die politically”. Thus, Souvanna said the Pathet Lao was a foreign organization.

The NLHS has no basis in the Lao people. It is a foreign body. We saw this clearly when the provinces of Samneua and Phongsaly were “liberated” from the communist yoke. The NLHS can therefore only last, exist and act if it has foreign troops at its side. Without them, the revolution dies like a lamp without oil.

Souvanna urged his brother to break with the DRV, writing, “Let it abandon its masters and its inspirations, let it become a strictly nationalist Lao party, send the North Vietnamese soldiers home, and peace will flourish in Laos.” He accused the Pathet Lao of owing its existence to a foreign power. “The NLHS has become a very obedient lackey itself.” To Souvanna, the war was a defensive war for the RLG, where, as soon as the RLG defended itself, the Pathet Lao “accuses it of aggression”. But Souvanna accused the Pathet Lao of hypocrisy. “The NLHS on its part advances, takes ground together with its North Vietnamese accomplices. This is what it calls ‘liberating’ territories.”

This letter from 18 February 1966 is the one letter in the entire correspondence that seems to show Souvanna losing his temper with Souphanouvong. He writes,

All these tactics, which we have seen You practising in our country for 20 years, is the ABC of the communist revolutionary. It no longer deceives anyone. The NLHS applies it however with method and stubbornness, as it has learned it. The Messages, the grandiloquent protestations to His Majesty, to the People, to the Prime Minister, to the Co-Presidents of the ICC etc. ... proceed from this education where you, your allies, draw your strength and your weakness, because nothing is less inevitable than your victory. Millions of men live happily under non-Communist regimes.

Souvanna here explicitly rebuked Souphanouvong for seeking to communize Laos, while acknowledging and condemning Souphanouvong’s own communist beliefs.

Souvanna ended the letter by saying among other things that the Pathet Lao was not a real government.

If you really want to act as a Lao patriot, start with your friends by respecting the 1962 Accords. Let's govern together in a government that exists... Let's give the International Commission all the freedoms and all the means to really control the execution of the 1962 Agreements.

He finally called into question the Pathet Lao's own claims to save Laos from foreigners.

I expect a clear answer from you on this subject and not fanciful accusations and a historical account of an issue where, as an eyewitness to the Vietminh presence in Laos, I can easily destroy all your arguments on independence and the unwavering patriotism of the NLHS.

The breakdown in the correspondence between Souvanna and Souphanouvong was the result of personal disputes. But it was also caused by the essentially irreconcilable stances each man took. This could only be settled on the battlefield. Finally, as mentioned earlier, there appears to be a two-year gap in the correspondence, from April 1968 to April 1970. Souvanna's diaries are not a perfect record, but are suggestive of a breakdown in communication during these years. Already in a 1 April 1966 letter, Souphanouvong suggested that communication via letters was losing its efficacy, as he complained of having to repeat his positions "because you persist in not wanting to understand them". Similarly, in a letter of 24 February 1966, Souphanouvong wrote, "relations between us have currently shown an undesirable tension...".

Finally, in a letter from 13 May 1967, Souphanouvong attacked Souvanna Phouma on a number of issues, sealing the rift. He opened on a conciliatory note.

Although our relations have visibly deteriorated, I have nevertheless sent you letters and telegrams regularly, especially in these serious and fraught hours of danger for our dear Fatherland. My only aim, each time, has always been to discuss thoroughly and frankly these and other questions, in the hope that, conscious of the dangers to our country ... you would think

of yourselves of reducing your activities prejudicial to the Nation and to the Lao people, since the enemy left you the nominal title of [prime minister] of the puppet regime.

But now, long after his brother might be dissuaded from authorizing the US bombing, Souphanouvong no longer blamed Souvanna for the bombing. This marked a major shift from his letter dated July 1964, where he personally accused Souvanna of ordering the bombing. Souphanouvong claimed that Souvanna was nothing more than a US puppet, which was the most powerful rhetorical attack he had.

Remember that three years ago, [when you had] resort[ed] to the same kind of slander, by your “request” (in fact, it was the demand of your Yank masters) you gave the green light to their open and brazen air attacks against our population, against our villages, pagodas, schools, hospitals and markets thus allowing them to accumulate ruins and mourning without number, with a relentlessness and increasing scale every day.

Souphanouvong was incensed at Souvanna’s continued accusations against the DRV: “you have not ceased, especially during the last two months, to distort the truth and forge lies to denigrate the NLHS and slander the Democratic Republic of Vietnam”. Souphanouvong instead praised the DRV.

The Vietnamese people and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam have always helped us in our struggle against the colonialist and imperialist aggressors, for the conquest and safeguarding of our national independence. Can’t you see that they are universally admired for their incredibly heroic and glorious struggle against the Yankee imperialists?

Souphanouvong accused Souvanna: “you have confused your enemies and your friends”. Finally, Souphanouvong expressed great fear of the introduction of US troops (which he had mentioned in earlier letters) in sharp terms: “the introduction in Laos of GIs and their satellites which will trample the land of our ancestors and cause greater calamities to the Nation...”. Souphanouvong even expressed

fears of extinction as the war escalated: “Everyone, at home and around the world, knows perfectly well that the US imperialists are the savage aggressors of Laos, that they are perpetrating in Vietnam a war of extermination even more bloodthirsty than the Nazis...”. Given this strongly worded letter, it was difficult to keep the lines of communication open between the two men. However, Souvanna did not save as many of his own letters, so it may be that he also contributed to the breakdown in communication in ways not preserved in the record.

Conclusion: Brotherly Bonds in War and Peace

The correspondence between Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong reveals a new, volatile and divisive chapter in their relations. The letters are notable for recording how the two brothers, once close political allies, were now unable to overcome their differences. Certainly, their relations declined as a result of the escalation of the Second Indochina War, the commencing of the US bombing campaign, and their real political differences. However, they were also damaged by the personally upsetting content of the letters. The inability to communicate in the letters led to Souvanna and Souphanouvong being unable to resume peace talks, which prolonged the war. Their personal bickering interrupted many important discussions. Instead of resuming peace talks or organizing a ceasefire, they bickered over who was the true neutralist leader, or who was a pawn of foreign powers, or whose government was legitimate. These arguments consumed scarce time and space in the correspondence and left little time for much more important discussions about the war. It was a unique situation when two leaders on opposing sides of a major Cold War conflict happened to be blood relatives who until recently had been close political allies. The letters thus were written not as a platonic exchange of political differences or with the pragmatism of two leaders at war with each other, but with a deep sense of personal betrayal and bitter rivalry communicated by insults, accusations, incitements, condemnations and even death threats.

The correspondence discussed in this note is a new source for researchers, providing insight into the US bombing of Laos, especially in its personal dimensions. It is unique for offering a cache of primary sources on Lao historical actors, wartime leaders and statesmen that is unedited, unfiltered by foreign diplomats and features private, behind-the-scenes correspondence not meant for public consumption. It shows particularly well the deep involvement of the RLG in the US bombing campaign, and especially the role that Souvanna Phouma himself played as RLG prime minister and minister of defence. Indeed, Souphanouvong blamed Souvanna for the bombing not long after it began. This, too, was another source of conflict in the letters as Souphanouvong also repeatedly pleaded with Souvanna to stop the bombing—pleas that fell on deaf ears. The correspondence stopped for over two years because of the personal disputes as much as the ongoing war and ideological clashes. But there is more in this correspondence, much less the entire corpus of Souvanna's diaries, than this research note can explore. One thus awaits the future research that will be written using these new sources.

Miraculously, relations between the two men were not permanently damaged. Souvanna Phouma again negotiated a third coalition government after the 21 February 1973 peace accord. His critics, many from within the RLG, again felt he was too soft on the Pathet Lao, but he now had US support to reach a rapid agreement (Evans 2002, pp. 166–67). He stayed in the country after 1975 and did not flee like many other RLG officials. Neither was he placed under house arrest nor sent to re-education camps like most of the other RLG civilian and military leadership who stayed, including even the royal family. This set the stage for his relations with Souphanouvong to recover over time. Also important was the fact that Souphanouvong was sidelined within the new Lao People's Democratic Republic by his rival for leadership of the Lao communist movement, Kaysone Phomvihane (Baird 2018, pp. 744–46). Souphanouvong's son told Christopher Kremmer that Souphanouvong and Souvanna continued to debate politics until the end of their lives.

He recalled the two old men, his father and his uncle, arguing to the end about politics, as the patrician Souvanna Phouma taught his communist half-brother to play bridge. The Red Prince [Souphanouvong] was still president at the time, but having suffered a stroke on his way to a non-aligned summit in Harare in 1983, his strength too was failing. (Kremmer 2003, pp. 95, 98)

The son added that Souphanouvong reminisced in the last days of his life not about the victory of 1975, but the Issara days when he fought alongside Souvanna Phouma. Souphanouvong finally died on 9 January 1995 of a heart attack. One wonders if he had grown lonely over the eleven years after Souvanna Phouma died on 10 January 1984.

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NOTES

1. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the letters may have been vetted before being sent. This is an interesting possibility for future research. In this note, I could not substantiate this view; as such I interpret the letters as the work of the two half-brothers themselves.
2. The Souvanna Phouma papers are accessible in the Manuscript Reading Room of the Library of Congress (<https://lcn.loc.gov/mm84060491>). A finding aid is available.
3. The original documents were lent to the library in 1982 and returned to Souvanna Phouma while he was in Paris in 1984.
4. Souvanna underlined the part of the 19 July 1964 letter reading: “avec votre complicité”.
5. The 1962 Geneva Accords were an agreement on Lao neutrality and respect for Lao sovereignty and territory. It also was a peace treaty intended to end RLG–Pathet Lao fighting. It sought to end foreign military involvement, especially by the US and DRV. The agreement was signed by fourteen nations. It established a second coalition government, which included a balance of ministers from the Lao right wing, left wing and neutralists, with Souvanna given the crucial portfolios of prime minister and minister of defence.
6. On conflicts among RLG elite families, see Baird (2021, pp. 22–41).

7. A US memo dated 21 May 1964 and authorizing the bombing of Laos includes RLG approval given by Souvanna as prime minister and minister of defence (Wolfson-Ford 2018, p. 355).
8. By this point, both Souvanna and Kongle closed ranks with their former foes, the Lao right wing, to fight the war. This “fusion” of the right wing and RLG neutralists is explored in detail (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 321–49). In brief, neutralists like Souvanna were drawn to unite with the right wing because of fears about the survival of an independent, sovereign Lao state and violations of Lao neutrality and territory by the DRV. Evidence for Souvanna’s shift can be seen in his leading role in the US bombing campaign, but also in his speeches and writings that became indistinguishable from former right-wing foes (see his letter to Souphanouvong of 18 February 1966). To RLG civilian and military leaders, including Souvanna, the bombing campaign was the only way to prop up the flagging RLA, which was clearly outmatched by the PAVN, to prevent a rapid defeat in the war.
9. This was how the RLG leaders saw the Second Indochina War by 1964. Souvanna’s government released several white papers on the DRV invasion of Laos (one in French intended for the international community, which provided extensive detail to give proof of the DRV’s war on Laos, and another in Lao for a domestic audience) and reprinted the Geneva Accords of 1962. Souvanna wrote a preface to the document, in which he accused the DRV of breaking the agreement (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 334–42). Since the 1990s a number of studies on the DRV’s role and decision-making process in the conflict have been written using newly accessible archives (see Nguyễn 2012 and Asselin 2013) in line with New Cold War Studies. DRV-RLG conflict began in the First Indochina War, so a useful resource is Goscha (2022). The literature on the Second Indochina War is vast, but for one general work, see Young (1991).
10. Kongle began receiving supplies from the US as early as November 1962 because the Pathet Lao were withholding supplies and also sending operatives to undermine his leadership and create breakaway factions. The situation worsened on 12 February 1963 with the assassination of neutralist Colonel Ketsana Vongsouvanh, which led to a revenge killing of Quinim Pholsena on 1 April 1963. This triggered the effective end of the second coalition government as Souphanouvong and other Pathet Lao ministers left Vientiane. It also began to push Souvanna and the neutralists closer to the rightists as neutralists fought openly with the Pathet Lao.
11. There were various reasons the US favoured intervening via air power. It wanted to avoid sending ground troops or risk openly violating the Geneva Accords of 1962. The RLA itself was deemed not able to fight

- the PAVN (although it could win against purely Pathet Lao units). The RLAF did not perform well, but it was given outdated aircraft that were susceptible to ground fire. The rugged terrain of Laos also favoured air travel over other forms of travel. But the US Air Force faced a number of difficulties in its early operations, including using older RLAF-marked T28s and using old, inaccurate maps. The latter problem became serious when they would bomb the wrong target, hitting civilians or RLA posts.
12. The US supported Souvanna because it wanted to preserve the façade of the second coalition government. This gave Souvanna leverage with the US. The US went to great lengths to provide Souvanna with convincing evidence of PAVN forces fighting in Laos. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point. For an analysis of the strategic priorities of the US, DRV, Pathet Lao and RLG, see Stuart-Fox (1996, pp. 46–48).
 13. In March 1964, Souvanna told Unger he was contemplating requesting US military aid. On 6 April, Souvanna visited Hanoi, where he warned the DRV there would be war if peace talks failed. On 18 April, he went to meet Souphanouvong on the Plain of Jars, but was stopped by a coup attempt, which failed. Then, on 16 May, the Pathet Lao seized the Plain of Jars (from which they could threaten both Luang Prabang and Vientiane simultaneously). In response, Souvanna ordered the US bombing campaign while the government newspaper carried a story accusing PAVN troops of genocide against Lao (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 349–82). The US memorandum authorized the bombing at the request of the RLG because of its “threatened existence”; and limited the target area to the Plain of Jars, while reconnaissance only was authorized for the south along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.
 14. In my research, I found two major cases for this: in June 1964, over secrecy and authorization; and in May 1965, over civilian casualties. In each case, Souvanna stopped the bombing before then resuming it after his concerns were addressed (Wolfson-Ford 2018, pp. 370–72, 374).
 15. See Westad (2005), Hack and Wade (2009) and Vu (2009).
 16. Even though Souvanna developed rules of engagement for the campaign along with US officials, the US Air Force and Navy were not always capable of following these orders. They made mistakes, including bombing the wrong target, and were without good navigation aids.
 17. This was also criticized by Lao political opponents, military leaders and US officials who questioned Souvanna’s close relations with Souphanouvong (Soutchay 1980, p. 95).
 18. Please note that all quotations in the remainder of the note are from letters found in the private diaries of Souvanna Phouma held by the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

19. Souphanouvong wanted to meet Souvanna in person in Paris in September 1964. But Souvanna could only send a representative to talk. Souvanna instead offered to Souphanouvong to talk in person in Vientiane. But this conflict over negotiations itself was affected by personal disputes. Thus, in a letter of 3 December 1964, Souphanouvong accused Souvanna of lying about why the talks never happened. “Why didn’t you dare recall the truth of the facts as I have just related them, to say that I softened your mind and not just kept you waiting, etc? It’s clear you deliberately turned things around, coldly distorting the truth to fool public opinion and blame others.”
20. Obviously, the king did not keep it private, but shared it with other RLG officials, including Souvanna.
21. Neutralism in Laos meant being non-aligned in the Cold War. In terms of the Second Indochina War, it meant extracting Laos from the conflict, which was seen as a Vietnamese affair. Neither Souvanna nor Souphanouvong ever advocated strict neutrality, which would not involve any foreign influence. Strict neutrality was advocated by others like Bong Souvannavong. See Lockhart (2012), Tarling (2017) and Sidwell (2020).
22. This letter was written to support calls for a new international conference on Lao neutrality. Obviously, the conference never happened and the letter may not have been sent.
23. Souphanouvong underlined the text in the original.
24. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
25. The claim to inhabit the Lao territory for centuries was one of the main aspects of the idea of a Lao race—explicitly stated in news editorials in 1959. So, too, was the idea that Lao as Buddhists could never be communists. This idea was a cultural form of Lao anti-communism with which Souvanna was particularly enamoured. Souvanna endorsed the idea of a Lao race in his preface to a historical work published in 1958 by Oukham Phomvongsa, writing to Oukham to express “his great gratitude and good wishes” (Wolfson-Ford 2018, p. 260; see further, Wolfson-Ford 2016). And as mentioned in an earlier note, Souvanna adopted a hard-line stance on the war out of fear for the survival of the country. Further, the government press warned of genocide by PAVN troops.
26. This is the date most RLG leaders saw as the date of Lao independence: 19 July 1949. An independence ceremony was held in January 1950. That it was an incomplete independence would become the *raison d’être* for the Pathet Lao, founded at a meeting held over 13–15 August 1950.

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