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Indochina News Summer 2002

The following articles are from the Summer 2002 Interchange.

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Summer Washington Report

Since FRD's mission calls for "normal diplomatic, educational, cultural and economic relations with Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam," it is worthwhile to envision what "normal relations" look like, as well as identify and celebrate the steps taken towards realizing improvements in relationships that may not yet be fully normalized.

"Normal relations" do not require that the United States, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam agree on every issue, experience no problems and misunderstandings, or have the same form of government. All nations in the world are imperfect (need I add, including our own) and suffer to a greater or lesser degree from social problems, human rights violations, and underdevelopment. These issues, as well as the demands of security and law, rarely fit neatly inside national boundaries. The United States and its citizens are involved in international disputes with every nation on earth; indeed, it would be abnormal not to disagree on issues of importance.

What normal relations do mean is that when problems occur, the United States treats Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (and vice versa) according to the same rules and principles as other countries. Despite a history of conflict and mistrust, in other words, the two (or more) sides should be willing to engage in dialogue on all levels—people-to-people exchange, trade, tourism, academic research, and diplomatic negotiations. Blocking these natural processes of human and national interaction makes understanding, conflict resolution or mitigation, and change impossible. Eventually, it leads to hostility and war.

Advocating for normal relations, therefore, does not consist of supporting or opposing the policies of any one government, whether our own or another nation's. As private citizens and independent organizations, of course, we will take positions from time to time on policies that encourage or attempt to block normal relations. But our role is not to act as unofficial diplomats in loco governmentis. It is rather to facilitate governments,

development organizations, education institutions and businesses to engage in normal dialogue and communication themselves, on many levels. This spring in Washington has been full of opportunities to further this role.

Trade with Laos

The largest single remaining gap towards full normalization in the region is the denial of normal trading relations (NTR) to Laos. With the granting of NTR to Afghanistan in June 2002, Laos is now one of only four countries still subject to 1930's-era Smoot-Hawley tariffs. (The other three are Cuba, North Korea and Yugoslavia.) NTR is not a special privilege, but a basic building block of foreign relations, the lack of which constitutes de facto sanctions.

As its neighbors have received NTR, U.S. trade with Laos has dropped over 80% from a high of \$19.7 million in 1996. Laos's 5 million people exported less than \$4 million of goods to the U.S. last year. They paid \$1.8 million more in tariffs, an effective rate of over 45%—the highest in the world.

In addition to advocating for NTR with Laos through Congressional meetings, media interviews, and commentaries, FRD joined five other organizations to co-sponsor the "National Laotian-American Symposium on US-Laos Relations" on May 22-24. For additional information and documentation from the Symposium, please see articles at www.laotianlink.com.

Legacies of War

Both physical and psychological remnants of war continue to impede normal relations between the US and Indochina, as well. At the March conference in Hanoi on effects of Agent Orange and dioxin (see Interchange Spring 2002), US Ambassador to Vietnam **Raymond Burghardt** called Agent Orange "the last significant ghost" remaining from the war. The conference provided new grounds for research cooperation between scientists in the US, Vietnam and elsewhere. However, advocates on all sides agree that research alone is not enough. Dr. **Wayne Dwernychuk** of Hatfield Consultants Ltd. told a Mother Jones reporter that he foresees "a slow bureaucratic process that will not address the immediate humanitarian needs of a large segment of the Vietnamese population."

At a May reception and discussion hosted by FRD and the Institute for International Education in New York, Vietnam's Vice President **Nguyen Thi Binh** commended the steps taken at the Hanoi conference, but emphasized that with 150,000 Vietnamese "severely affected" by dioxin, a separate program to assist victims is essential. (See article, p. 17.) A spokesperson at the Vietnamese consulate in San Francisco said that "anyone with a conscience" would support both research and relief.

Less politically sensitive, but equally deserving of assistance and cooperation, is the

issue of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) remaining from the war. FRD joined the Mennonite Central Committee in organizing a Congressional showing of the Laos-focused documentary film, “Bombies,” with the sponsorship of Reps. **Dennis Kucinich** (D-OH) and **Lane Evans** (D-IL). Post-film discussion ranged from the need to ban cluster bombs in future conflicts to the humanitarian imperative to assist victims of unexploded ordnance in Laos and other countries. Speakers **Titus Peachey**, **Narin Sihavong** and **Andrew Wells-Dang** called on the US to increase mine clearance and development aid to Laos as well as to pass the US-Laos Bilateral Trade Agreement.

An additional legacy of war are the deep divisions on many of the above issues that persist among Americans of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese descent, as well as other Americans who participated in or were affected by the wars in Indochina. Over the past several months, FRD has engaged and responded to the viewpoints and concerns of individuals and groups we would characterize as opponents of normal relations, including some (but by no means all) Hmong-Americans and ethnic highlanders from Vietnam. We recognize the suffering these groups and other Southeast Asian Americans have experienced as they seek to maintain their culture and identity, and we hold nothing personal against them. They are as entitled as anyone to express their opinions and to participate in the democratic process. They are not, however, entitled to block others from participation through threats, intimidation, or lies. We seek to counter these tactics where possible through an open airing of differences, while continuing to support the growing number of voices in Indochinese-American communities who favor cooperation and dialogue.

Justice for the Khmer Rouge

The United Nations pullout in February from negotiations with the Cambodian government over a proposed tribunal for leaders of the Khmer Rouge led to yet another reconsideration of the role of the US and international community in Cambodia. Opinions among governments and non-governmental organizations are mixed, with some favoring reversal of the UN’s decision, others for abandoning tribunal plans, and others for going ahead with some kind of tribunal without the UN, even if this risks lowering the standards and respectability of the process. Despite intense behind-the-scenes diplomatic activity, the US has yet to commit to any one particular outcome.

On April 22, FRD and the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies co-sponsored a public forum on “Prospects for Justice for the Khmer Rouge.” Cambodia scholar Craig Etcheson presented background on the search for genocide justice, details on the failed negotiations with the United Nations, and proposals for where advocates for a tribunal might go next. Etcheson’s conclusion that “a show trial is better than no trial at all” prompted questions and debate from participants on the differences between justice and reconciliation. Materials from the discussion can be found online, along with Etcheson’s paper, at: http://www.sais-jhu.edu/depts/asia/index_events.htm#brownbag.

In addition to the above-mentioned visits and exchanges, the April-June period also saw visits to the US by leaders of the Lao National Front, Vietnam's deputy prime minister **Nguyen Manh Cam**, deputy trade minister **Luong Van Tu**, Buddhist and Christian religious leaders from Vietnam, a Vietnamese Ministry of Justice delegation, and members of Vietnam's National Assembly. We were saddened to learn that one of the members of the religious delegation, Rev. **Pham Xuan Thieu** of the newly-recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), passed away on June 24 following a heart attack.

The number and scope of these official exchanges is testimony to the opportunities presented by more normal relations. On the US side, Ambassador Burghardt joined five other ambassadors to ASEAN countries in New York and Washington for a dialogue on improving economic relations in June. A US trade delegation had visited Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in May to evaluate the state of the economic relationship six months after normal trade status took effect.

Summer also brings several changes in the regional diplomatic corps. The former US Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, **Charles Ray**, was nominated in June to serve as US Ambassador to Cambodia, following the retirement of **Kent Wiedemann**. Ray, an Army veteran and career Foreign Service officer, currently awaits Senate confirmation.

At the Lao Embassy in Washington, **Phanthong Phommahaxay** arrived to begin service as ambassador in April and formally presented his credentials to President Bush on June 19. Amb. Phanthong replaces Amb. **Vang Ratthanavong**, who returned to Vientiane to become director of the Americas and Europe division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Beneath the diplomatic activity and official delegations, finally, lies a wealth of cultural creativity and cross-pollination. Documentary films chronicling the American experience in Vietnam, the Hmong experience in America, and other topics have been showing nearly weekly at film festivals and on public television. **Catherine Filloux's** new play, "The Silence of God," gives a poignant look at life in Cambodia during and after the Pol Pot regime. And at one point in May, no fewer than four Vietnamese photography exhibitions were on display in Washington. Interest in the arts, as with cuisine or tourism, cuts across political boundaries and breaks through the barriers to understanding imposed by history and ideology. With fully normal relations, we will all benefit from these expanding horizons.

By Andrew Wells-Dang

The National Laotian-American Symposium on US-Laos Relations, held in Congress on May 22-24, 2002, was the first such event of its kind in Washington. The more than 120 participants included Laotian-Americans from around the US, calling for open dialogue on US-Laos relations and supporting normal trade relations between the two countries. Additional participants represented several dozen Congressional offices, as well as NGO representatives, American veterans, and media. The keynote speaker was US Ambassador to Laos **Douglas Hartwick**. Four members of Congress spoke at the Symposium: two sponsors, Reps. **George Miller** (D-CA) and **Betty McCollum** (D-MN), plus two additional members with an interest in Laos.

The Symposium was co-sponsored by five non-profit organizations in addition to FRD. **National Laotian Americans for Cooperation and Development** comprises an emerging network of ethnic Lao, Hmong, Khmu and other groups in the US that support increased dialogue with and assistance to their country of origin. **The American Friends Service Committee** and **Mennonite Central Committee** are two of the American NGOs who have worked in Laos in the longest and most committed fashion. The **Lao-American Exchange Institute** works to develop educational exchange and trade with Laos. Finally, the San Francisco-based **Jhai Foundation** was begun by an American veteran to carry out self-help projects in Laos and the US with a focus on reconciliation.

Complete texts of the majority of presentations at the Symposium may be accessed online at www.laotianlink.com. Additional documents relating to US-Laos relations and the establishment of normal trade relations can be found on FRD's website at www.ffrd.org/indochina/laos/index.html.

Diplomats and Members of Congress

Following an introduction by Rep. Miller, **Ambassador Hartwick** outlined his vision of greater US engagement with the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Despite some remaining differences, the US is cooperating well with the Laotian government on recovery of MIA remains, cleaning up unexploded ordnance (UXO), counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism efforts. The United States continues to place a high priority on monitoring the human rights situation in Laos, including religious tolerance. Despite the poverty facing Laos, the country is "struggling to correct its problems," he said. "It is in America's interest to encourage this effort."

In the MIA program, over 150 remains have been recovered out of over 500 missing Americans in Laos during the Indochina conflict. Opium and narcotics eradication includes helping poor hill tribes to find alternate sources of income and providing technical assistance to Lao officials dealing with a growing trafficking problem. On terrorism, the ambassador noted that the Lao people have suffered their own terrorist attacks in recent years and have expressed solidarity with the US since September 11.

Extending normal trade relations to Laos also forms a part of US engagement. Once in place, the provisions of the Bilateral Trade Agreement with Laos will oblige the Lao

government to conform to acceptable international standards on the rule of law and private and foreign investment. Ambassador Hartwick also expressed American desire to build a bridge for understanding and cooperation between the two countries via the 500,000 overseas Laotians living in the United States.

[A complete text of Amb. Hartwick's speech is available at www.laotianlink.com/official/hartwick.htm.]

Rep. George Miller represents a district in the northeastern Bay Area of California and has been a long-time leader in promoting US-Vietnam relations. His interest in Laos was sparked by the 7,000 Lao-Americans residing in his district, including Sary Tatpaporn, whom Miller thanked for bringing the importance of closer US-Lao relations to his attention. During a brief visit to Vientiane in March 2002, Rep. Miller met Ambassador Hartwick and discussed ways to improve relations and expand trade between the United States and Laos. The absence of normal trading relations obviously puts Laos in a disadvantageous position compared to Vietnam and Cambodia, and Rep. Miller hopes to play a role in moving towards an improved trade relationship as he did in the case of Vietnam. In addition, the ongoing problem of UXO is a tragic legacy of war from three decades ago that continues to cause great grief and casualties today. The Bush Administration and Congress should expand financial support for cleaning up land mines. The Symposium is "making history," Miller continued, "by bringing together the many voices of the Lao community throughout the United States... Your voices are essential to move forward on resolving these issues and I thank you for coming together today and for inviting me to be a part of it."

Rep. Betty McCollum, who represents one of the largest Hmong-American communities in the US (St. Paul, MN) noted the contributions of Hmong citizens to her district and to American life. Her district liaison, Chao Ly, attended the Symposium. Many Laotian-Americans contribute to Laos by visiting their country of origin and supporting family and friends there. Rep. Anna Eshoo of California became interested in Laos when her son, Paul, moved there to work for an eco-tourism organization in Luang Namtha. In one year, the program brought in \$20,000 to local villagers, while respecting the culture and surrounding environment and also assisting people to become economically independent.

Rep. Ron Kind of Wisconsin expressed his pride in representing more than 10,000 Laotian-Americans, including many veterans of the war in Southeast Asia. In his view, US relations with Laos show both encouraging and discouraging signs. It is possible to move forward in relations with Laos, emphasize avenues of mutual agreement, support constructive engagement where it is appropriate, and try to develop a relationship based on mutual trust and understanding. Along with this, the Lao government should change its policies to reflect international norms of human rights and democracy. Representatives of the United States, both in the State Department and Congress, should address these issues. Right now opportunities exist to build bridges between Laotian-Americans and Laos, as well as beneficial engagement on issues such as narcotics or combating international terrorism. On the issue of the disappearance of two Hmong-Americans near the Laos-Thailand border in 1999, the US should continue to seek for further cooperation in conducting the investigation and find answers in the case.

Seng Soukhathivong, Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of the Lao PDR in Washington,

was invited next to present his government's viewpoints. US-Lao bilateral relations have existed since 1955 and have never been seriously disrupted. In the Lao struggle for independence and liberation, the country and its people were subject to many hardships and were extremely poor. Laos is still dealing with multiple obstacles in rebuilding the country. Laos is a small tolerant and peace loving country, surrounded by larger neighboring countries. Hence the Lao government implements a foreign policy of peace, independence, friendship and cooperation with all states around the world. In 1997, Laos became a full member of the ASEAN, and now has diplomatic relations with 111 countries around the world, that host its 29 Missions including the Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Relations with the US are based on that same foreign policy, and the Lao government and its people sincerely wish the existing friendly relations to be further developed and strengthened.

During the past 25 years, the US and Lao PDR have cooperated in many fields such as the excavation of MIA remains, cooperation in narcotics control, and clearing UXO. Promptly after terrorists attacked New York and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001, President Khamtay Siphandone sent a telegram to President Bush expressing his condolences to the American government and the victims' families and reaffirming his support to the United States in the fight against international terrorism. Both sides should do their best to eliminate obstacles to improved bilateral relations and should emphasize the interests of all the people of the two countries rather than individual interests.

Community Remarks

This section of the Symposium comprised statements by Laotian-American representatives from different ethnic backgrounds and regions of the US, as well as a presentation by FRD Deputy Director Susan Hammond. Many speakers were addressing members of Congress for the first time and showed great emotion as they spoke.

Symposium coordinator Sary Tatpaporn opened the discussion by describing the Laotian-American experience in the US since the end of war in 1975. Despite clear attachments to the US, Laotian-Americans still have relatives, friends, and birthplace memories that link us to Laotian people and Laos as a nation. They should use these special connections to contribute love, care, knowledge, and our involvement to better US-Laos relations.

Laos is a small country surrounded by larger and more powerful neighbors with different political ideologies and economic systems. The US has a critical role and humanitarian obligation to assist Laotian people to heal the wounds of war and to assist Laotian people in order to position themselves to meet the many challenges in the 21st century. More than 1.3 million Laotians are risking their life daily with the UXO that continues to contaminate more than 35 percent of the land of Laos after the conclusion of war 29 years ago. The US government should begin new programs to remove and destroy UXO. Both the House and Senate should also quickly ratify the Bilateral Trade Agreement with Laos. Normal US-Laos trade relations will not only stimulate the Lao economy and improve the living standards of Laotian people, but will significantly strengthen Laotian-Americans' economic base as well.

Capt. Kue Chaw, Advisor on Veterans Affairs to the Lao-Hmong Coalition in North

Carolina, received a gracious introduction from **Lionel Rosenblatt** of Refugees International. Kue Chaw served for 15 years in the Royal Lao Army as a communications officer. After arriving in the US after the war, he realized the difficulty that he and fellow Laotian-Americans were having in coping with war trauma and adjusting to American ways of life. He spent twenty years as a family counselor before retiring two years ago. Kue Chaw's dream is that Laotian-Americans and Laotians inside Laos are able to work together toward building a stronger and more prosperous nation. As a means to that end, he recommended immediate granting of normal trading relations (NTR) to Laos, so that Laotian people have the opportunity to learn and participate in the global economy; clearance of UXO and filling of all bomb craters in order to guarantee the safety and security of Laotian citizens; and Lao and American veterans, including Laotian-Americans, coming together to develop a joint plan of action to heal the wounds of war. Veterans on both sides need professional help in order to cope with post war trauma such as depression, anger, anxiety, and other chronic diseases. The long war not only stopped economic growth in Laos, but also destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives and the environment as well. Despite having lost property during the war, Kue Chaw emphasized that he has no intention of reclaiming his house and land, but rather wishes to help those who suffered on all sides.

Phaeng Toommaly Andersen, a Khmu-American woman from California, linked her roots in Laos to developing normal relations with the US. Granting NTR to Laos is a fair and natural course of action for the US, as trade is one of the best ways to bring in resources to assist in building infrastructure and economic development to the people of Laos. NTR status will bring more foreign investors into Laos. Investment in Laos will bring about economic growth and development as well as job opportunities. The demand for a quality work force will lead to investment in education, and education stimulates all kinds of transformation. NTR status is vital to the survival of the Laotian people and their country. Laos is crippled as a result of the secret war, in which the US was heavily involved; thus, it is our moral obligation to assist with economic growth and development.

As Laos looks forward towards economic transformation, changes in the life style of the Laotian people are inevitable. However, as a Lao-Khmu American, Andersen raised the question whether the benefit of these changes will extend to the remote corners of Laos where ethnic minorities reside. The issues of inequity and inequality that have traditionally been barriers to the social and economical well being and advancement of the ethnic minorities in Laos should come into the awareness of both governments. NTR with the US should bring opportunities for all Laotians.

Andersen also provided a brief background of the Khmu people. The indigenous Khmu are the largest ethnic minority group in Laos, making up 11% of the 6 million total population. They cultivate glutinous rice, the principal staple of Laos. During the war, their experience was devastating. Many Khmu-Americans, especially the elderly, are in the US in body, but their minds, spirits, and souls are still back in Laos, their beloved homeland. Not until Andersen traveled back to Laos did she understand the depth of this experience. The Khmu mountain village of her ancestors still lacks access to education, health care, and employment. Other issues prevalent among the young people in the village include drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and truancy. Like thousands of other Laotian-Americans, Andersen's family started sending money back to Laos, but soon realized that this would not help to sustain their social and economic well being in the

long run. Therefore, she seeks better ways to bring resources into Laos.

Seng Fo Chao, co-founder of the Iu-Mien American National Coalition in Portland, OR, gave a personal testimony of seeing his father killed as a young boy, which haunted him for decades until it became “a monkey that jumped off my back.” With the options of choosing violence or peace, he chose peace. Since then, Seng Fo has become a link with Yao (Iu) and Mien minorities in China. When he returned to Laos for the first time in 2000, he found that Laotian people were “as friendly and as kind as Americans and Chinese” and saw progress and positive development all the way from the Chinese border area to Vientiane, along with experiencing the challenges of official corruption. He hopes on future trips to “eliminate the differences, bridge the gap, and build on the common interests and common goals for all.” The Symposium could become the foundation for peace.

Susan Hammond described FRD’s work in promoting reconciliation in Laos, particularly through coordinating the 10th Conference of the Forum on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam which took place in Vientiane in June 2001. This was the first international open-registration conference of this scope and focus to be held in Laos and its huge success was thanks in part to the hard work of the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs Department of International Organizations, and the commitment of the Lao government to engage in open dialogue on a variety of development issues with their neighbors and the international development community. Going into the preparations for the conference in the spring of 1999 there was a great deal of doubt expressed by many in the international development community in Laos as well as in Cambodia and Vietnam that the Lao government would agree to host the conference, but they readily agreed. The Lao government is willing to actively engage with the American and international community to work together to address the social and economic needs of its citizens.

American NGOs are very much engaged in development programs throughout the country, some receiving US AID funds for their programs. NGOs are reaching into underserved communities in very remote areas of the country, they are in dialogue with their Lao government partners and the donor community on ways to address the social – economic needs of Laos, including many human rights issues. Congress appropriated \$2 million last year for humanitarian and development aid to Laos in addition to the funds allocated for MIA, drug eradication and demining. This funding should increase. Passing NTR is also a low-cost way to assist Laos and improve US-Lao relations.

Questions and Answers

The centerpiece of the Symposium was an extended period of open discussion with Ambassador Hartwick on a wide range of topics in US-Laos relations. Questioners addressed topics including increasing the budget for humanitarian demining in Laos, how US funding is spent, guarantees for foreign investment, the status of human rights, and possibilities for cultural and educational exchange. Unlike a typical Congressional hearing or the secretive sessions that opponents of normal relations have held in Washington in the past, the Symposium drew participants from a variety of political backgrounds and styles.

Ambassador Hartwick responded to questions by highlighting the chances that the

Symposium offered to hear many different views, not only from supporters of his actions but also some opponents, all of which he characterized as helpful feedback. In particular, the ambassador said that he hopes to work with the Laotian-American community in a broad way to raise concerns with the Lao government, learn about the situation in Laos, and hear the views of the government and the people on a range of issues. The US Embassy hopes to host groups who visit Laos to engage in dialogue with the Lao government in a systematic way.

One questioner, Laura Xiong of the Hmong International Human Rights Watch, said that since Ambassador Hartwick's nomination, "the problems for the minority Hmong and Lao freedom fighters continue to get worse," and asked what steps the ambassador was taking about this. Hartwick answered that "with all due respect, madam, I've never met a Hmong freedom fighter," but that he remains concerned about the conditions faced by not only Hmong but also other ethnic groups in Laos. Since the embassy does raise human rights issues with the Lao government, he urged anyone possessing specific, timely information to communicate it to the embassy. As ambassador, he hopes to travel all around Laos, even to the most remote areas, and so far the Lao government has been cooperative in granting these requests. Finally, Amb. Hartwick cited progress regarding religious freedom, which he said is extremely important to the United States, as an example of how persistence and respectful dialogue can produce results that benefit all concerned.

Afternoon Panels: Trade, Development and War Legacy

The Symposium continued with three panel discussions on key topics in US-Laos relations. For the panel on **Trade and Economic Issues in Laos**, Ambassador Hartwick described his embassy's efforts to foster economic and social development in Laos through USAID-backed assistance in silk production and the health sector, among other areas. **Edward Gresser**, director of the Trade and Global Markets Project at the Progressive Policy Institute, presented the economic case for NTR with Laos, comparing import and export growth in neighboring countries with the decline in US trade with Laos since 1997. Gresser noted that the average tariff rate for Laotian goods exported to the US is 45.3%, the highest in the world. Last year, he pointed out, Lao and Hmong businesses paid \$1.8 million to the U.S. Customs Services in order to sell \$3.9 million worth of goods. He concluded that Laos's exclusion from NTR is "highly anomalous," since no hostility or security concerns exist between Laos and the US, and that Laos stands to gain from NTR in terms of greater exposure to the world, higher living standards, and more exchange with Laotian-American communities in the US. **Phaeng Toommaly Andersen**, who spoke during the morning session, also joined this panel, which was moderated by **Sary Tatpaporn**.

The panel on **Sustainable Development in the Lao Context** featured presentations by **Seng Soukhativong**, **Seng Fo Chao**, and **Todd Sigaty**. Sigaty, executive director of Village Focus International, works in upland villages in Taoi district, Salavan Province, one of the most remote areas of Laos. His short video on the educational and health challenges facing indigenous residents of that region set the scene and provided context for an extended discussion on development needs, challenges and successes from the viewpoints of NGOs, government and Laotian-Americans. One concern raised by some Laotian-American participants is to ensure equal access for all citizens of Laos to

development. Minister-Counselor Seng acknowledged that some inequities remain, but said that his government was doing its best to correct these problems and that all Laotians were treated according to the same legal status. The panel was moderated by **Susan Hammond**.

The **War Legacy** panel began by showing clips from the documentary film, “Bombies,” produced by Jack Silberman and Independent Television Services (ITVS). **Lee Thorn** of the Jhai Foundation, who is himself featured in “Bombies,” described his experiences serving on a Navy aircraft carrier engaged in secret bombing missions over Laos. **Saeng Kue**, representing the Hmong American Network in Fresno, CA, **Peter Sihavong** of the Lao-American Exchange Institute, and **David Elder** of the American Friends Service Committee also spoke on this final panel of a remarkable day in Congress.

Forum Conference: One Year Later

by Susan Hammond

Meetings were held in June in Hanoi, Vientiane and Phnom Penh to evaluate last year’s 10th conference of the Forum on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and to get input on what types of conferences and meetings would be beneficial in the future.

Participants in these meetings generally told Conference Coordinator Susan Hammond and FRD Director John McAuliff that it was beneficial to hold regional conferences on development issues enabling dialogue with others working on similar issues. The common theme of each of the meetings was that the conference provided an excellent opportunity to network with other development experts, academics, host government officials and donors. When asked if they had a chance to follow-up with the contacts that they made at the conference, most said that they had only been able to exchange a few emails. However there were several examples of more long-term cooperation that developed or were strengthened as a result of the contacts made at the Forum, including plans for future cooperation on developing vocational training between the Italian Don Bosco Foundation in Cambodia and the Vietnamese government and plans for future cooperation between the Institute of International Education and the Center of National Education and Development Policy of Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training.

There were mixed reviews about the quality of some of the panels, with a common critique that there were too many speakers and not enough time to go into detail about issues during the questions. Some noted that the format of the panels with both government and non-government speakers limited the ability of speakers and participants to speak freely on many issues. However, when asked if future conferences should be limited to non-governmental participants, most agreed that the conference should continue to have active participation by government officials. Government representatives, no matter what country they are from, have to express official positions on issues, but the fact that they are present at the conference and engaging with non-

governmental participants is important in itself and should continue.

Most of those in the review meetings agreed that the smaller sectoral discussion groups provided an excellent opportunity to dialogue freely on specific issues and led to many interesting discussions and ideas for future action. A common comment was that very little follow-up was made on any of the discussions in the sectoral groups, other than a few exchanges of emails after the conference. One positive example of the effects of the discussions in the sectoral groups was that one of the participants in the Agent Orange – UXO and Landmines discussion group was able to encourage UNICEF in Vietnam to include the dangers of UXOs and Agent Orange in their child health and accident prevention program.

Though there was no consensus on what the future of the Forum on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam should be, almost all participants in the follow-up discussions agreed that regional gatherings of some type should be held in the future. Suggestions for future meetings included: smaller conferences or workshops on particular sectoral issues that are common to each of the three countries, such as the Legacies of War – Agent Orange, Landmines and UXOs; or a meeting on the impact of Globalization and Multilateral and Bi-lateral Trade Agreements on the development work of NGOs. Some felt that Forum style multi-issue multi-constituency conferences should continue but with more emphasis on the sectoral discussion groups and less time for large panels and plenaries. Another suggestion was to use smaller panels with recognized international experts on various sectors.

No decision of the future of the Forum on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam has been made. The staff of the Fund for Reconciliation and Development welcome further suggestions about what type of meetings or conferences would be helpful to further dialogue and cooperation in the Indochina region with the organizations working there. FRD hopes to have a regional staff person in place in Hanoi in the next several months who will pursue the possibility of holding a smaller conference or workshop on one or more of the sectoral issues of interest to all three nations and to further dialogue about what other types of meetings would be of use in the region.

Please send comments and suggestions to Susan Hammond: shammond@ffrd.org. Vientiane conference proceedings can be found in summary and complete versions in the Forum section of www.ffrd.org, and in previous issues of *Interchange*.

Agent Orange in Laos and Cambodia: Documentary Evidence

by Andrew Wells-Dang

The Spring 2002 Interchange featured a summary on the use of Agent Orange and other herbicides in Laos and Cambodia, co-written by Roger Rumpf, Jacquelyn Chagnon and FRD Washington representative Andrew Wells-Dang. As most of the records of herbicide spraying remain classified and inaccessible, the researchers have attempted to collect what is known and identify gaps for future research. The following data are preliminary findings from declassified US military and State Department documents held at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD, as well as from limited secondary sources. Detailed references and copies of records are available on request from washington@ffrd.org.

Laos

The 1962 Geneva Accords proclaimed Laos a neutral country and forbade outside military involvement there. As the war in Vietnam escalated, however, neither the US nor North Vietnam was able to resist intervening. As local Laotian revolutionaries and their Vietnamese allies built a network of paths along the border, later termed the “Ho Chi Minh Trail,” covert US operations used every means available to try to stop them. Among these methods was defoliation by herbicides, especially Agent Orange.

Already being sprayed in South Vietnam, herbicides had a military purpose of clearing land around roads and trails so that enemy movements could be detected and stopped. The environmental and human consequences never entered the calculation; nor, with few exceptions, did the international legality of spraying ever trouble American leaders. By far the greater concern was preservation of secrecy, in case evidence of chemical use might be turned to Communist propaganda advantage.

The primary tactic in the “secret war,” however, was bombing, which caused immense damage in almost every province of Laos. The use of herbicides, a sideshow to a sideshow, was reported on during the conflict but officially denied until 1982, when Air Force historian William Buckingham’s draft of the Operation Ranch Hand study was made public under a Freedom of Information Act request by the National Veterans Task Force on Agent Orange. In a subsequent New York Times interview, former US Ambassador William Sullivan said that “secret” was not the right word to describe the herbicide program: “Rather, it was not admitted or confirmed.” According to Buckingham, the US Air Force conducted herbicide operations in Laos from December 1965 to September 1969. Former chief Air Force historian Richard Kohn claims that this spraying took place “with the permission of the Laotian government” headed by then-President Souvanna Phouma, but archival documents make it clear that Ambassador Sullivan and other officials provided very little specific information to the Lao, who may have preferred to remain uninformed of the details of covert US operations carried out in their country.

The “experimental” use of herbicides outside of South Vietnam was first considered by the Department of Defense as early as October 1962 to “clear off jungle access routes” in a broad, undefined area around “the Cambodian-Laotian-North Vietnam border—a difficult task given that Cambodia and North Vietnam had no common border, with

several southern Laotian provinces in between. This excessive plan was never implemented in full, but it gives a sense of what was to follow.

Ambassador Sullivan expressed nervous opposition at first, citing “allegations concerning earlier [US] uses of chemical weapons in Laos.” Exactly what those allegations were is unclear, but they presumably refer to chemicals other than herbicides. The increasing sense of alarm over the movements of personnel and materials along the “Ho Chi Minh Trail,” however, soon removed his scruples over the program. Sullivan recognized that interdiction would require “massive amounts of defoliants,” along with “Washington discussion at high levels,” since herbicide use “would involve the overt violation of the 1962 agreements on Laos.”

In November 1965, soon before the Air Force spraying program was to begin, Sullivan wrote in a memo to Washington, “I am convinced that our efforts in Laos, particularly along infiltration route, are critical to US forces engaged in South Vietnam... We can carry on these efforts only if we do not, repeat do not, talk about them, and when necessary, if we deny that they are taking place.” Not everyone followed the ambassador’s suggestions. The first stories in the US press broke in December 1965. In February 1966, the Washington Post and New York Times ran front-page stories on defoliation operations in Laos. To the State Department’s consternation, the Times quoted one American official in Saigon saying, “We’re going to turn the Ho Chi Minh Trail brown. We’re mounting a maximum effort over there every day.” A telegram from Gen. William Westmoreland later that year put the same message in more formal language: “During all phases, there will be an intensification of psychological warfare and herbicide operations... through the Laotian Panhandle... We must use all assets at our disposal to block, deny, spoil and disrupt this infiltration.”

In response to a November 1969 Congressional query, the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam provided a summary of 434 sorties in Laos from flight records beginning on December 3, 1965 and ending September 7, 1969. Air Force spraying was heaviest during the first half of 1966, with more than 200 sorties spraying approximately 200,000 gallons of Agent Orange. Spraying continued at a relatively rapid rate until February 1967, when with the exception of one mission listed in May 1967 it ceased until November 1968. Buckingham’s Ranch Hand study lists a condensed version of spraying over the same period, totaling 419,850 gallons over 163,066 acres. (These totals, from a classified Air Force study, are around 20% higher than what MACV reported to Congress.) Agent Orange was the primary herbicide used (about 75%), followed by Agents Blue (15%) and White (10%).

No complete list of targets and locations has been found; detailed records from some periods have been handed over to the demining agency, UXO Lao, while others may be scattered in military archives. The limited number of maps and coordinates found at the National Archives suggest that the greatest concentration of spraying occurred north and south of the Demilitarized Zone near the Vietnamese border in Savannakhet and Attapeu provinces.

Declassified documents do record the aircraft used for Air Force operations: mostly C-123s from the Ranch Hand operations in South Vietnam, as well as a limited number of F-4s. Both types were flown from Bien Hoa air base as well as off ships in the South China Sea. At one point, military authorities proposed establishing a Thailand-based

spray capability; whether this ever occurred is unknown, although herbicide tests were conducted at Thai air bases as early as 1964-65.

As with bombing runs on North Vietnam, Laos was also a secondary target: on at least one occasion in October 1966, when adverse weather conditions hampered spraying near the DMZ in South Vietnam, Operation Ranch Hand's planes sprayed Laos instead. A January 1969 memo from the Chemical Operations Division at MACV headquarters in Saigon notes that "the legality of these out-of-country operations is uncertain" and cites increasing risks from ground fire near the DMZ. The author, Maj. Gen. Elias Townsend, recommends that herbicides be used only in "high risk" areas and in conjunction with "suppressive fighter attacks." As the bombing of Laos increased dramatically after the "bombing pause" on North Vietnam starting in late 1968, the role of herbicides in Laos declined, as they fell short of the total war the US was beginning to wage.

The use of herbicides was quickly expanded to the destruction of enemy crops. Citing effective use in South Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland first proposed crop destruction in Laos in May 1966. Records from the US Embassy in Vientiane list 64 crop destruction missions from September 1966-September 1969, targeting a total of 20,485 acres. Agent Blue was the most frequently used chemical on these flights. US Admiral McCain later attributed part of Gen. Vang Pao's short-lived 1969 capture of the Plain of Jars to crop destruction missions there. And after the Lao government banned opium cultivation in 1971, herbicides were used to destroy hilltribe poppy crops as late as 1974. One mission report from 1969 describes "a highly successful attack on enemy rice crops in North Laos...almost four thousand acres destroyed just before harvest."

All of the above data refers only to spraying carried out by the US Air Force using fixed-wing aircraft. It may not be a complete record even of these operations, although the start and end date can be confirmed by multiple sources in the declassified record. What is not included here is any spraying conducted by helicopter or directly from the ground. Both the Air Force as well as other units had this capability. Also unconfirmed is herbicide use by Air America or the CIA, whose records are still closed. The 1971-3 opium destruction missions were probably carried out on this basis, and secondary sources report that the CIA also had spray capability, possibly operating out of Thailand.

Cambodia

In contrast to the covert spraying in Laos over a long period, one incident of herbicide use in Cambodia resulted in a major international incident. This attack took place on French- and Cambodian-owned rubber plantations in Kompong Cham province during April-May 1969, at a time when the US had no diplomatic relations with the government of then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Following official complaints from the Cambodians to the US, through Australian intermediaries, the State Department agreed to send a team of appointed experts to investigate the damage, hoping that the story would go away. Memos and telegrams from the period appear confused as to what actually happened, who did the spraying, and what if any responsibility the US should take for the incident. Initial theories ranged from drift from spraying in neighboring Tay Ninh province, Vietnam, to an elaborate Viet Cong provocation. No one outside of the embassies appeared to believe these ideas.

The State Department inspection team of Drs. C.E. Minarik, Fred Tschirley, and two others confirmed the extent of the damage to 173,000 acres (7% of Kompong Cham province), 24,700 of them seriously affected. The rubber plantations totaled approximately one-third of Cambodia's total and represented a loss of 12% on the country's export earnings. They reported that the defoliation probably took place at a higher than normal altitude and occurred at night. Minarik and Tschirley were under strict orders not to divulge their findings, however, and were also warned not to look at evidence of "alleged US-caused damage outside these terms of reference."

An independent monitoring team followed in December 1969 led by scientists E.W. Pfeiffer and Arthur Westing. Their international delegation visited the site as well as interviewed Cambodian and foreign government officials, and concluded that the United States was responsible but that the Air Force was not involved. Although they found no concrete evidence, Pfeiffer and Westing conclude that the CIA "or some similar United States agency active in southeast Asia" carried out the attack in order to destabilize the Cambodian government. They cited evidence of a CIA spray capability and suggest that helicopters may have been used, rather than fixed-wing aircraft. Available documentation tends to support this hypothesis. William Sullivan, promoted to undersecretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in Washington, confirmed in November 1969 that "the rubber plantations were not defoliated inadvertently," but the idea that it was an enemy provocation "has some problems."

In November 1969, the Cambodian government filed a claim of \$12.2 million in damages. The US never admitted guilt, but amazingly enough made preparations to pay the claim amount as a way to promote "broader interests." Then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger attempted, however, to put off payment until fiscal year 1972, writing that "Every effort should be made to avoid the necessity for a special budgetary request to provide funds to pay this claim." In other words, Kissinger wished to keep the payment secret. Or perhaps he already was making plans for the coup against Sihanouk and covert US-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia that began the following year, rendering any question of payment irrelevant.

In addition to the Kompong Cham attack, what additional incidents of herbicide use took place in Cambodia? There is no evidence to suggest that spraying of any kind took place before 1969. The only covert US operation from 1967-69, Operation Daniel Boone, involved Special Forces and Montagnard reconnaissance teams on the ground in Rattanakiri and Mondulkiri provinces—not an operation likely to be supported by aerial spraying. On the other hand, the State Department's instructions to Minarik and Tschirley suggest that there may have been additional instances of covert chemical use in the same period. And there exists at least one confirmation that herbicide spraying was taking place in Mondulkiri exactly at the time that Drs. Pfeiffer and Westing were investigating the Kompong Cham incident. A February 23, 1970 telegram from the US Embassy, Saigon, referencing "Cambodian Complaints of Herbicide Damage," states: "There were no, repeat no, C-123 herbicide missions opposite Mondulkiri on December 18. Missions were flown opposite Mondulkiri...on other dates in December, including December 17 and 19...Past experience shows [Cambodian] protests are not always accurate."

As a result of the Kompong Cham incident and similar pressures in South Vietnam, restrictions began to be placed on herbicide use in 1970. In March 1971, Secretary of

Defense Melvin Laird requested that he personally approve any herbicide operations in “Laos, Cambodia, or Thailand.” The scope of such additional spraying also remains unclear. Further Research

The above findings are clearly only a partial record of herbicide use in Laos and Cambodia. Many additional sources remain to be examined, many of them classified. Among these are any and all CIA records. The full extent of US use of herbicides in these covert conflicts will require much more research both in the US and on site.

In today’s atmosphere of security concerns over terrorism and increasing government secrecy, even previously declassified records are now being re-classified and “screened” by the National Archives and other government repositories. This includes, for instance, the Project CHECO reports on which Buckingham based much of his data. It is ironic that the US Government goes out of its way to avoid referring to Agent Orange as a “chemical weapon” for public relations and liability reasons, except when a researcher attempts to access sensitive records. In this case, the researcher is denied access to chemical subject matter that, according to an Archives notice, “might aid terrorists or their supporters.” This policy has a chilling effect on independent research and access to information, and it perpetuates exactly the sort of secrecy in which the US carried out herbicide spraying against Southeast Asia.

Nguyen Thi Binh Stresses Education, Calls for Cooperation on Trade & Agent Orange

by Andrew Wells-Dang

On May 7, 2002, the Fund for Reconciliation and Development and Institute for International Education (IIE) hosted a discussion and reception in New York for Vietnam’s Vice President, Nguyen Thi Binh. Madame Binh came to the U.S. to lead Vietnam’s delegation to the United Nations Special Session on the Rights of Children; she was accompanied by distinguished delegates including Mme. Tran Thi Thanh Thanh, chair of the Committee for the Protection and Care of Children (CPCC), Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Chu Tuan Cap, Vice-chair of the Office of the President Nguyen Van Binh, and CPCC vice-chair Doan Ngoc Hung.

Mme. Binh is familiar to Americans of the Vietnam War generation as the determined and photogenic chief negotiator of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam during the 1972-3 Paris peace talks. Following the reunification of Vietnam, she became Minister of Education and was tasked with the difficult job of integrating two vastly different school systems in the north and south. She has served as Vice President since 1992 and also holds many other positions, including acting as chair of the Agent Orange Victims Fund of the Vietnam Red Cross. This was Mme. Binh’s second visit to the United States; the first was to attend a conference at Stony Point, NY in the 1980’s of what became the Forum on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

In introducing Mme. Binh to an audience of close to 100 at IIE, FRD Executive Director John McAuliff pointed out the major contributions of educational exchange towards

normalization of relations between the US and Vietnam. At the same time, he emphasized the “old business that we need to wrestle through in terms of Agent Orange, unexploded ordnance, and other effects of the war.” With normal relations, the US and Vietnam now have the opportunity to work collaboratively on these and other issues. In his introductory remarks, IIE President Allen Goodman said that Mme. Binh’s visit and example shows that “it is possible for Americans to understand Vietnam not at war and not as a poor country. The potential for development of Vietnam is unlimited.” Following the discussion with Mme. Binh, one participant who was active in the national antiwar mobilizations of the 1960’s and 70’s, Barbara Webster, presented Mme. Binh with posters of herself that were used in demonstrations and, as she put it, “gave daily inspiration to thousands of people.”

Madame Binh’s wide-ranging remarks reflected on the past and present in US-Vietnam relations, while also showing hope and challenges for the future. Excerpts follow.

**Excerpts from Remarks by
Vice President Nguyen Thi Binh
May 7, 2002**

As you know, I and Ms. Tran Thi Thanh Thanh are heading the delegation of Vietnam to the Special Session on the Rights of Children at the United Nations. It is a great pleasure for our delegation to meet many people here. We have six children here representing the children of Vietnam.

Over the last ten years, the education and protection of children in Vietnam have made great achievements. We have established universal primary education for all children as of the year 2000. In some localities, this has extended to universalizing junior high school education through the 9th grade as well. Our objective is to complete the universalization of secondary education for all children by 2010.

To American friends, this objective may seem modest. But for a poor country like Vietnam, this is a great task. Our children normally go to school in two shifts—one in the morning, one in the afternoon. In some schools there have to be three shifts in order to accommodate everyone. The conditions for learning are still very difficult, especially in mountainous areas. On one hand, we take care of general education; on the other, we also pay great attention to higher education and vocational training. During the past ten years, the number of university students in Vietnam doubled. In comparison to neighboring countries, however, the ratio of university students to the general population is still low.

We need not only funds for education but also well-trained teachers to teach them. So we are trying to increase the number of teachers in Vietnam. We are also trying to increase the number of Vietnamese sent abroad to study who then come back and teach students in Vietnam. We still have some weaknesses, however, in training teachers for vocational and professional schools. I wish to express my sincere thanks to all our friends here, and especially to the Institute for International Education, who are assisting Vietnamese students to study in the United States. I hope that you will continue your assistance to Vietnam in this field. Your support will continue to help us to escape from backwardness and poverty and advance towards modernization, so that we no longer lag behind other countries in the region. You can see that the Vietnamese people and Vietnamese children

are not short on character and innovation. But due to the long war and the short time we have had to recover, we have not yet been able to fulfill our potential.

The signing of the bilateral trade agreement between Vietnam and the United States has opened the way for the normalization of relations between the people of our two countries. Even before the signing of this agreement, we have already undertaken many activities towards economic cooperation. US companies already have 130 projects in Vietnam, and the US ranked twelfth among countries with investments in Vietnam. Vietnamese exports to the United States now total around \$1 billion per year. We are confident that the economic and trade relations between our two countries will develop strongly.

We are now paying great attention to the legal system in Vietnam. Mme. Thanh Thanh and I are both members of the National Assembly. We have tried very hard to reform our laws and create a legal framework for foreign investment in Vietnam. For our part, we wish to improve and expand our economic relations with all countries, including the United States. Since regaining our independence, we have no other hope than to rebuild the country and bring happiness to the people. That is our ultimate goal. If there is no happiness for the people and no improvements in our daily lives, independence is worth nothing.

After the House of Representatives, the Senate and President George Bush approved the Bilateral Trade Agreement, we considered that a victory for our two peoples. But we were very much surprised that the House also approved a bill on human rights at that time. You can see that these two issues are in opposition to each other. I don't know why the US government wishes to put political conditions on cooperation between our countries. Since the provisions of this bill violate the principle in international law of non-interference in the affairs of other countries, we conclude that the House of Representatives is also violating human rights. The trade agreement is for the benefit of our two countries and two peoples. It will only work when both sides respect the mutual interests of the other. In so doing, our cooperation will be sustainable.

During the war against US aggression in Vietnam, many Americans took to the streets to protest against the war. Those who participated in the antiwar movement showed great sympathy to the Vietnamese people, but also were keeping the traditional values of the American people. Many of those friends also contributed to the normalization of relations between our countries. That goal has now been achieved. So today, on behalf of the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese state, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of you.

I hope that you will join my effort to facilitate and improve relations between Vietnam and the United States. With economic and diplomatic normalization taken care of, we hope that you will pay more attention to the humanitarian aspects. One of the deepest consequences of the war concerns the victims of toxic chemicals used during the war, especially Agent Orange. The Vietnamese government has done its utmost to reduce the suffering of these people and their children. But we think that the US Government should also help assume responsibility for this.

In March this year was the second round of the meetings between US and Vietnamese scientists concerning the study of Agent Orange in Vietnam. I highly appreciate the

results of the meeting, especially the cooperative research between the two sides. But in my opinion, scientific research cannot be done in a vacuum. We need to be concerned about the urgent humanitarian issues as well. Besides the scientific research program, we should have a program to support and assist the victims of Agent Orange, to which the US Government could contribute.

You know that the American GIs who were exposed to Agent Orange during the war have been compensated by the US Government. Based on our evaluation, there were about one million Vietnamese who were also affected. Some of them have died, since the war ended 27 years ago. But many are still alive and are dealing with various diseases.

There are also many places where toxic chemicals still lie in the soil. We need to clean those areas in order to protect the health of people in the surroundings. And we need the technology to clean these areas. I think the US Government should support Vietnam in this field as well, and I hope that you will join us in requesting this government support.

Remembering Frank Tan

The close cooperation of the US Office of Strategic Services and the Viet Minh in 1945 seldom merits more than a footnote in history. FRD, with the support of a grant from the Ford Foundation, has sought to recuperate this history as a symbol of the underlying character and values of both countries and a reminder that the tragedy of the next thirty years might have been averted by paying greater attention to the perspective of the Vietnamese. In the course of this project it has been our pleasure to come to know Charles Fenn and his former comrade in arms Frank Tan who passed away last year.

by Charles Fenn

Charles Fenn was the first member of the U.S. military to officially work with Ho Chi Minh in 1945. He recruited Ho to provide intelligence information to the Allied troops in their fight against the Japanese. Mr. Fenn then went on to become a renowned playwright in England, and wrote a biography of Ho Chi Minh. He currently is retired in Ireland.

Prior to the end of World War II, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia formed a French colony known as Indo-China. Immediately following the collapse of France in 1940, this colony was occupied by the Japanese without resistance by the French colonists; and shortly, indeed, with their co-operation. The native population had long since been mostly hammered into servitude.

The Japanese having earlier inflicted disaster on the Americans at Pearl Harbor, and additionally having invaded China, now overran all East Asia, defeating and enslaving the colonists of the various European powers who had previously seized all this area and themselves enslaved the natives.

For a long period there was no effective retaliation to this Japanese take-over. America was fully engaged with Japan in the Pacific; and the Allied Nations (now for a good long period limited to Britain!) were equally busy combating Hitler. In any event, the

distances were vast, and air-travel was still almost primitive.

But as the war progressed, the Allied resources expanded and improved largely in America, which was of course free from enemy attack, as well as having wide recourse to resources in the entire American continent. Air travel in particular rapidly improved so that after a year or two a few planes actually reached the Allied bases in China. These helped to stem the further Japanese advance; and finally a few could even be spared to operate against the Japanese in French Indo-China (FIC). I myself at this time was operating as an American military-intelligence officer covering south China. For this job I employed Chinese agents, most of whom I'd met during my time in China as a news-reporter, and were trusted friends, as well as acquainted with the areas worked in.

But where could I find anyone acquainted with French Indo-China and also hopefully trustworthy? One possible source now occurred to me. I had recently met, and much liked, a trio of civilians: Lauren Gordon, a Canadian, Harry Bernard, an American, and Frank Tan, a Chinese-American. They had been working at various jobs in FIC when the Japanese invaded, and had promptly fled into China. They had here set up an Intelligence unit. Gordon having friends in Delhi had solicited a couple of portable radio units, one of which he kept in China, and had sent to the other a French friend in northern FIC. With this primitive equipment he and his two partners had set up an intelligence unit, known generally as GBT. Such information as they did get, Gordon gave to the British, Bernard gave to the Americans, and Tan to the Chinese: a really splendid example of international co-operation.

I put it to Gordon that if he would like my co-operation I could increase both their funds and their equipment; and although I wanted the Intelligence obtained, he might continue to offer it to the British and the Chinese, who were, after all, our allies. So we got working together, soon expanded our network, and were thus able to introduce, and then expand, American air attacks over FIC.

The expanded FIC network was, of course composed of GBT's former friends, nearly all French. Suddenly, without warning, the Japanese, now officially alarmed, had identified and arrested the lot of them and the net went dead!

It so happened that shortly before this catastrophe, an FIC native had, with the aid of several compatriots, rescued an American airman shot down over FIC after a prodigious journey, always harassed by pursuing Japanese who would have butchered the lot, brought him safely back to the US airbase in China. He subsequently refused a reward, declaring he was happy to have served the Americans. It has to be remembered that at this period, of course, America was the most popular nation amongst colonized peoples, having won her own freedom from colonization, and subsequently having established no colonies of her own.

I was intrigued by this Indo-China 'native,' not only because he spoke excellent French and quite good English, but because of his impressive personality. Although of middle age (and indeed looking much worn), he had a remarkably vivacious personality, and the brightest eyes I'd ever come across; and I'd read that was a sure sign of genius! As most of us were then in our twenties and thirties this old man seemed quite impressive, and it struck me that he might partly replace our lost French network with a native hook-up. While asserting his ready compliance, he admitted total ignorance of the requirements.

So over the next few days, I taught him the rudiments of military Intelligence. In this I was helped by Frank Tan, who got on particularly well with our new recruit, and ultimately offered to accompany him on his return to FIC and help set up a network. Despite constant dangers and difficulties, Tan did achieve this objective. But he never ceased to pay tribute to the overwhelming genius, energy and magic personality of his companion – whose name was Ho Chi Minh.

Charles Fenn was the first member of the U.S. military to officially work with Ho Chi Minh in 1945. He recruited Ho to provide intelligence information to the Allied troops in their fight against the Japanese. Mr. Fenn then went on to become a renowned playwright in England, and wrote a biography of Ho Chi Minh. He currently is retired in Ireland.

Review: *An American in Hanoi*

by Andrew Wells-Dang

by Desaix Anderson. EastBridge, March 2002; ISBN 1-891936-03-4. Paperback, \$24.95.

Diplomatic history, like other historical change, is often made by men and women working behind the scenes rather than in the spotlight. In this context, a new memoir by Desaix Anderson, who served as charge d'affaires at the US Embassy in Hanoi from 1995-97, contributes significantly to understanding how the United States normalized relations with Vietnam. Anderson maintains a remarkable and commendable spirit of hope for the future of Vietnam and US-Vietnamese relations, which he emphasizes are based on a fundamental convergence of strategic interests.

The value of *An American in Hanoi* is limited by the fact that most of the direct source material dates from Anderson's tour in Hanoi, with revisions and updates added in a somewhat uneven fashion. A section in the middle of the book on the pre-normalization period from 1975-91 offers little new material not already covered in previous histories. The title could also be more precise, as Anderson was clearly not just any "American in Hanoi" but a representative of the US Government. The tension between Anderson's personal observations and his role as an official spokesperson make this memoir both fascinating and occasionally frustrating. *An American in Hanoi* is relentlessly upbeat, providing a welcome antidote to grouchy journalists and political scientists who still describe one of the fastest-changing societies on earth as "stagnant" and "sclerotic." Anderson was clearly thrilled by his assignment: having spent the beginning of his Foreign Service career in Vietnam, he found his return experience both personally and professionally satisfying, even "intoxicating." When Anderson enthuses that he is "enchanted by the exotic people called Vietnamese," he might be over-romanticizing, but he is not alone—many Americans who have lived and worked in Vietnam since the 1990s discover to our surprise that we are welcomed. Like his successor in Hanoi, Ambassador Douglas P. "Pete" Peterson, Anderson responds with a nearly boundless optimism about the potential of doi moi economic reforms and the "revolutionary" changes underway in Vietnamese society.

Anderson is not unaware of reform's weaknesses—he notes the despair of youth and rising costs of rapid social and economic change in passing—but he ultimately believes

that an open economy and greater contacts with the outside world will bring Vietnam through. The bilateral trade agreement with the US, he argues, offers “a sure path to liberalization...bring[ing] Vietnam into line with its neighbors and radically chang[ing] Vietnam’s economy in a few years.” This may be overstating the case, but Anderson refers back to US interests to defend his point. Normal trade will not only benefit the Vietnamese, but also “ensure the kinds of changes the United States seeks in Vietnam. Without it, American influence will be sharply curtailed...” The US should improve relations with Vietnam, he emphasizes, because it is in both countries’ national interests. Yet he walks a fine line in defining US interests as promoting change in Vietnam, while concurrently denying that forcing change is part of official policy:

...[T]he confrontation with China on the issue of human rights has devolved into an unwinnable catch-22 conundrum, and should not be repeated with Hanoi if we hope to build a constructive relationship with Vietnam. I therefore adopted a two-pronged approach. We would work quietly with the government of Vietnam on immediate, specific cases to test their willingness to respond on a basis that did not violate their own sense of propriety...At the same time, we should realize that the environment for human rights, religious freedom, freedom of speech and the like would take time to develop...

The United States cannot force such change. It must come from within the society itself. By trying to force internal change in another society, we can limit...the framework for debate from a pure human rights issue to a nationalist/sovereignty tension. This plays into the hands of repressive elements in national governments. (p. 203)

Individual diplomats’ goodwill notwithstanding, however, it is difficult to conclude that overall the US has handled human rights diplomacy towards Vietnam with much better success than in China or elsewhere. With Congress leading the charge on human rights, current US policy is at best confusing and at worst exactly the conundrum that Anderson hoped to avoid. (Anderson describes his Congressional visits in detail, and emphasizes that most offices were supportive of his efforts. A few, however, were not; perhaps because of this, he flagrantly misstates the names of one opponent, Christopher Smith of New Jersey, “Congressman Steve Smith,” and his then-chief aide, Joseph Rees, “James Reis”.)

While no book can cover every topic in a subject as complex as US-Vietnam relations, it is unfortunate that Anderson’s forward looking spirit causes him to omit important war legacy issues such as landmines and Agent Orange. He also shows little recognition of the role of American NGOs and religious organizations in supporting normalization and Vietnam’s development. The only NGO that is mentioned, Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, is misidentified as “the Vietnam Vets.” And while the book returns several times to the experiences of the OSS-Viet Minh reunion in 1995, soon after Anderson’s arrival, he neglects to say that this was a FRD project with funding from the Ford Foundation. Hopefully these omissions will be corrected in a revised edition later on—but even in its existing form, *An American in Hanoi* is highly recommended reading.

Le Cao Dai: Doctor, Humanitarian

by Arnold Schecter

This March in Hanoi I met for perhaps the thirtieth time with my friend and colleague of

some 18 years Prof. Le Cao Dai, Vietnam's premier Agent Orange and dioxin researcher and humanitarian. Despite illness on his part, he enthusiastically planned our next few years of Agent Orange research, to take us both to our twentieth year of collaborative public health work in Vietnam. A few weeks later, I learned of his unexpected death, after a short hospitalization for pancreatic problems.

Who was this very remarkable man? He was a soldier who served in the army of his country, leaving his surgery and teaching in Hanoi to free his country of colonialism, from France first, then the US. He served for many years in the south of Vietnam as director of an underground surgical hospital, visiting his family in Hanoi only infrequently.

When he and I first met in 1984, he was the Secretary General of the 10/80 Committee, set up to study the consequences of chemicals used during wartime: American Chemical Warfare. He guided French, Japanese, American, Canadian, and Vietnamese researchers to learn more about where Agent Orange and its toxic dioxin contaminant got into Vietnamese people, and where and how it caused their illness. We all learned from Dr. Dai about Vietnam, the Vietnamese, and the in-the-trenches public health aspects of Agent Orange and the US-Vietnam war.

We brought our scientific and public health expertise from America, France, Canada, Japan and elsewhere, yet we learned from Dr. Dai much more than we taught. His wonderful intelligence, optimism, drive and adaptability produced discovery after discovery of dioxin contamination in Vietnam. Sometimes, as in Bien Hoa, of extremely high levels of dioxins in people, over 200 fold elevation, and in some soil there, over 1 million fold elevation.

Whatever the health consequence, this work documented people at higher risk than would otherwise have been the case, victims of Agent Orange of one kind.

Dr. Dai believed from his impressions and some early Vietnamese studies that there were malformations seen at birth which were from Agent Orange. He knew that more and better research needed to be conducted to prove or disprove these beliefs. He insisted on healthcare for those victims of Agent Orange; he later moved to head the Agent Orange Victims' Fund of the Vietnam Red Cross. He permitted and encouraged free and open collaboration between foreign and Vietnamese researchers, whatever the outcome of their studies.

When in the presence of others, whether his former students from Hanoi Medical School who were by then senior physicians, his family, or the Vice President of Vietnam, his warm and sparkling personality and convincing arguments were always present. He communicated to the press in Vietnam and in the USA, Europe, Japan and elsewhere with great skill about Agent Orange. Yet he was like a tiger, with passion for his beliefs and for his desire to help his people and his country, Vietnam. He adapted readily to customs in other countries when scientific meetings took him out of Vietnam. He was seemingly as comfortable with our children when he stayed at our home as he was with his family in Hanoi, and he became like one of ours. His large biological family can be found in many places, including HCMC, California and Paris. All of us interested in Agent Orange in Vietnam are in a sense the heirs of Prof. Le Cao Dai: humanitarian, surgeon, researcher, and spokesperson for Vietnam. The world will be much emptier

now that he is no longer with us.

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