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Laos

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March 10, 1961

MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

FROM: WWR

1. I believe you should reflect on the deeper lesson of our experience in Laos thus far. That lesson is that the Department of State has an understandable instinct to conduct pure diplomacy with minimum involvement with the CIA and the military until an acute crisis occurs. The tendency is then to turn the problem over almost wholly to those who control force, and to get the hell out. Concretely, first we listened to Brown; then we listened to Felt. We never faced them -- and what they represent -- together. This is the pattern which produces the uneasy relations between State and the Pentagon which surfaced yesterday.

2. This is the exact opposite of Communist policy which is to orchestrate force and diplomacy intimately at every stage.

3. The instinctive American position, in the face of Communist tactics, is dangerous on several grounds. When we are being nice diplomats we tend to lose ground. We lose opportunities along the way to strengthen our diplomatic position. When we turn to force, after diplomatic setbacks, we have to use more force than would otherwise be necessary, and we bring closer the moment when our position must be defended by direct U.S. military intervention.

4. There is another weakness. When the diplomats withdraw and we begin to think, as we did yesterday, in terms of military hardware, we tend to forget that, in the end, most of the situations we confront are, in their essence, political and can only be settled by diplomatic and political formulae. You yourself noted the vagueness of the Department's conception as to what kind of a political settlement in Laos is possible that we could live with.

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