# A COMPANION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

*Edited by*

Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco



© 2002 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd
a Blackwell Publishing company

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5018, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
Kurfürstendamm 57, 10707 Berlin, Germany

The right of Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco to be identified as the Authors of the Editorial Material in this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2002 by Blackwell Publishers Ltd

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A companion to the Vietnam War / edited by Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco.
p. cm. – (Blackwell companions to American history; 7)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-631-21013-X (hb)
1. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975–United States. 2. United States–History–1961–1975. 3. United States–History–1969- I. Young, Marilyn Blatt. II. Buzzanco, Robert. III. Series.

DS558 .C66 2002
959.704'3373–dc21

2002022763

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12.5 pt Galliard
by Kolam Information Services Pvt Ltd, Pondicherry, India
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
http://www.blackwellpublishing.com

# Contents

About the Contributors viii

Introduction xi

1 Hanoi's Long Century 1
*Stein Tønnesson*

PART I THE VIETNAMESE IN CONTEXT 17

2 In Search of Ho Chi Minh 19
*William Duiker*

3 Belated Asian Allies: The Technical and Military Contributions of Japanese Deserters (1945–50) 37
*Christopher E. Goscha*

4 The Realities and Consequences of War in a Northern Vietnamese Commune 65
*Shaun Malarney*

5 The My Tho Grapevine and the Sino-Soviet Split 79
*David Hunt*

6 "Vietnam" as a Women's War 93
*Karen G. Turner*

PART II THE AMERICANS IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONTEXT 113

7 Before the War: Legacies from the Early Twentieth Century in United States–Vietnam Relations 115
*Anne Foster*

8 Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and US Exceptionalism: Reconsidering the American Vision of Postcolonial Vietnam 130
*Mark Bradley*

9 Dreaming Different Dreams: The United States and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam 146
*Robert K. Brigham*

10 JFK and the Myth of Withdrawal 162
*Edwin E. Moise*

11 The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam During the Johnson Years 174
*Robert Buzzanco*

12 A Casualty of War: The Break in American Relations with Cambodia, 1965 198
*Kenton Clymer*

13 The Last Casualty? Richard Nixon and the End of the Vietnam War, 1969–75 229
*Lloyd Gardner*

14 Remembering Nixon's War 260
*Carolyn Eisenberg*

15 America's Secret War in Laos, 1955–75 283
*Alfred W. McCoy*

PART III AMERICANS AT HOME AND ABROAD 315

16 Missing in Action in the Twenty-First Century 317
*Bruce Franklin*

17 African Americans and the Vietnam War 333
*James Westheider*

18 Mexican Americans and the Viet Nam War 348
*George Mariscal*

19 "They'll Forgive You for Anything Except Being Weak": Gender and US Escalation in Vietnam 1961–65 367
*Robert Dean*

20 The Antiwar Movement 384
*Barbara Tischler*

21 The Veterans Antiwar Movement in Fact and Memory 403
*John Prados*

22 Sanctuary!: A Bridge Between Civilian and GI Protest Against the Vietnam War 416
*Michael S. Foley*

23 Knowledge at War: American Social Science and Vietnam 434
*Michael E. Latham*

24 The War on Television: TV News, the Johnson Administration, and Vietnam 450
*Chester J. Pach, Jr.*

Select Bibliography 470
*Compiled by Amy E. Blackwell*

Index 491

## Chapter Fifteen

# America's Secret War in Laos, 1955–75

*Alfred W. McCoy*

### Introduction

For nearly fifteen years, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) fought a secret war in Laos that remains one of the most significant and least understood aspects of the Vietnam War. Even now, nearly three decades later, the nature of this covert warfare and Laos's role in the wider Vietnam conflict are little understood. Since few beyond those Washington policy makers with access to classified studies are privy to its secrets, the legacy of American intervention in Laos remains obscure.

Nonetheless, the war in Laos is, through the presence of Hmong refugees, gradually slipping into American consciousness, albeit from a partisan perspective. To cite one example, the November 8 1993 edition of my local newspaper, *The Wisconsin State Journal*, carried two obituaries of American war veterans – one telling the story of a war that we all know, and the other revealing a history that, for most Americans, never happened. In the back pages of the paper's third section, we read of Joseph J. "Jim" Daggett of Monona, Wisconsin, who died at 73. Born here in Madison, Wisconsin and educated in our local schools, Jim served as a sergeant in the US Army in World War II, fighting in the major battles of the European campaign – Normandy, the Bulge, the Rhineland crossing, and Central Europe. Returning home to Madison after the war, Jim married "the former Grace Ostrowski" on October 19 1946 and worked for the next thirty years as a sergeant with the Dane Country Traffic Department. "He was a past commander and life member of VFW Post Number 7591, life member of the Disabled American Veterans, member of the Battle of the Bulge, member of the Cooties (VFW Hospital Division), member of the Wisconsin Professional Police Association, and also a member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church."

Further down the same page, is the obituary of Chia Vue Vang, also of Madison and also dead at 73. Her life reveals the broad outlines of this hidden history. Born in Ban Thia, Xhieng Khouang Province, Laos, Chia "was a great mother who worked

very hard as a farmer and raised seven sons . . . while her husband served in the CIA." During the Vietnam War, "six of her sons served with the CIA, fighting against the Communists. Meanwhile, Chia and the rest of the family hid in the jungles, going from place to place, avoiding the Communists." After 1975, "when the Communists took over the country," the Vang family fled to Thailand without any money. There, people had little to offer, "so the Vang family flew to the United States to start a new life safe from the Communists."

The war in Laos remains one of the most disturbing aspects of the wider Vietnam war. From 1965 until 1973, Laos absorbed more bombs per square mile than any country in the history of warfare. From 1960 to 1975, the Hmong people – non-literate, migratory hill farmers in the most remote reaches of northern Laos – suffered one of the highest mortality rates of any people in any modern war. Yet, as an ethnic minority, the Hmong had little to gain from the outcome of this conflict. In effect, they absorbed these exceptional casualties as pawns in a superpower struggle, a twentieth-century version of what British imperialists had once called "the great game."

In studying this secret war in Laos, we are thus forced to confront one of the most unpleasant aspects of the Vietnam War and one of the ambiguous applications of American power during the whole of the Cold War. While the United States had genuine ties to Britain, France, or even China, Laos remained, throughout our twenty years' intervention, little more than an arena of geopolitical conflict. Since Americans had no attachments to Laos and no real empathy for its peoples, Washington felt no restraint in the application of the technology of mass destruction and the tactics of covert warfare to its terrain. By the time combat ceased in 1974, the US Air Force had dropped 2.1 million tons of bombs, making tiny, impoverished Laos the world's most heavily bombed nation. For the sustained bombing of populated areas in northern Laos, the United States was probably guilty of war crimes under the 1949 Geneva Convention on protection of non-combatants.

During the first decade of American intervention (1955–65), Washington used the CIA and its new tactics of covert-action to intervene in Laotian politics – dividing local factions and stoking the tensions that led to civil war. During the 1950s, Laos was, in Washington's view, a "finger" pointing into the heart of Southeast Asia that would allow an eventual communist Chinese invasion. In the early 1960s, Laos thus became a testing ground for toughness in the global conflict between the USA and USSR. During America's second decade in Laos (1965–75), the White House combined CIA covert action with the technology of tactical bombing to fight a full-blown secret war in Laos. In this latter decade, Laos was home to the Ho Chi Minh trail – a strategic enemy supply route from North to South Vietnam that, from an American perspective, had to be destroyed at all costs. Throughout these twenty years, this alliance between the world's richest nation and its poorest was thus marked by an extreme imbalance of power that made it a most problematic relationship. The destruction of Laos during the Vietnam conflict is one of the saddest chapters in the history of the larger Cold War – a tragic interaction of American geopolitics and Lao internal politics.

## Washington Intervenes

During the early years of the Cold War, Laos, a French colony for the previous sixty years, joined the community of nations as a strategic territory whose fate would be determined by geopolitical conflicts elsewhere in the region or on the globe. In the early 1950s, as it moved from partial to full independence, Laos had a fragmented society and factionalized politics that left it open to manipulation by foreign powers. In forming the Kingdom of Laos out of four lowland principalities and dozens of highland societies, the French had created a new nation that was the sum of its divisions – ethnic, factional, and ideological. During the late 1950s, this small, mountain kingdom became a major flash-point of Cold War confrontation under presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy.

During the early years of the First Indochina War (1946–54), the Lao nationalist movement, or *Lao Issara*, split three ways – communist, neutralist, and right wing. In August 1950, Prince Souphanouvong. a member of the royal family with socialist sympathies, broke away to form the *Pathet Lao*, a left-nationalist coalition allied with the Vietnamese revolutionary movement. In November 1951, his half-brother, the political moderate Prince Souvanna Phouma, became the prime minister of what was still a French client state. When Vietnam's People's Liberation Army swept across northern Laos in March 1953 during an offensive against the French army, it installed the pro-communist Pathet Lao in the provincial capital of Sam Neua – an area adjacent to northern Vietnam that was to remain a liberated zone for the next twenty years. In October 1953, France granted Laos its independence, and the Royal Lao government emerged from the 1954 Geneva accords with its territory intact. Through French and American pressure, there were no territorial concessions to the Pathet Lao guerrilla forces.

Seeking to block the influence of the Pathet Lao and thereby hold this strategic flank of South Vietnam securely in the Western camp, the US Central Intelligence Agency, acting on White House instructions, backed the right-wing in seizing power in the late 1950s. Mindful of Laos's strategic position, the Eisenhower administration made this poor, highland nation a major focus of its Southeast Asian policy, at times appearing even more committed to Laos than South Vietnam. Under the Manila pact that created the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in late 1954, Laos, like South Vietnam, became a "protocol" nation that would be defended from communist aggression by the signatory powers like Thailand and the United States. During a visit to Bangkok for the inaugural SEATO meeting in February 1955, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles signaled the seriousness of US commitment to Laos by visiting Vientiane to urge attacks on the Pathet Lao territory. Under a diplomatic agreement between Vientiane and Washington in July, the US funded formation of a 25,000 man Royal Lao Army (RLA) – a comparatively large standing army beyond the means of a poor nation of less than three millions. Convinced that the RLA would serve as "trip wire" to block a communist invasion of Southeast Asia, the US Secretary of State invested 80 percent of US foreign aid to Laos in building a new army from the ground up.

But in November 1957, after months of talks, neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the communist Pathet Lao agreed to form a coalition government. Without consulting American officials, the neutralist Souvanna Phouma remained prime minister and Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong became his finance minister. In February 1958, the Pathet Lao guerrilla forces were formally integrated into the Royal Lao Army, a development that aroused concern in Washington.

With the left on the edge of power, the CIA began to intervene actively in Lao politics through its clients in the army and the right wing. In the parliamentary elections of February 1958, the Agency provided clandestine funding for the right-wing parties but they polled badly – capturing only seven of the twenty-one seats contested. Nonetheless, backed by CIA funding, a new conservative coalition, which included the CIA's client Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, emerged in parliament to oust the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma in August 1958. With the support of the CIA, Laos's new right-wing leader, Phoumi Nosavan, seized power in April 1960.

In August 1960, however, an obscure paratrooper, Captain Kong Le, angered at this blatant foreign intervention, led a neutralist coup that brought Souvanna Phouma back to power and forced Phoumi Nosavan from the capital. From his base further south along the Mekong in Savannakhet, Phoumi, with substantial CIA funding, rallied his forces and allied with Hmong leader Touby Lyfoung. In December, Phoumi's troops marched on Vientiane – capturing the capital after three days of artillery shelling and driving Kong Le's neutralists out of the city. Supplied by Soviet aircraft flying out of Hanoi, Kong Le retreated north, capturing the strategic Plain of Jars in January 1961. As North Vietnamese "volunteers" joined Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces, Soviet transport aircraft became a constant presence on the Plain of Jars, delivering supplies and ferrying troops. This operation represented the first projection of Soviet power into Southeast Asia, arousing deep concern in Washington and prompting formal diplomatic protest from the United States. Simultaneously, a Hmong force of 9,000 guerrillas – trained and armed by CIA operatives – seized control of mountains ringing the Plain of Jars for Phoumi and his new right-wing government.

As Laos descended into a three-way civil war, the great powers backing each faction came to the brink of nuclear war and then pulled back through summit negotiations. During these two years of tensions that led eventually to neutralization, tiny, impoverished Laos – through its remoteness and deeply divided politics – proved a dangerously volatile flash point of Cold War confrontation. In March 1961, the Pentagon, frustrated by the failure of the Royal Laotian Army to advance, had tried to convince the Kennedy White House to send a force of 10,000 marines to the Plain of Jars. When Kennedy seemed unwilling to support such a massive intervention, the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the National Security Council in April 1961 that: "If we are given the right to use nuclear weapons in Laos, we can guarantee victory."

Instead of such a massive response with conventional or nuclear forces, President Kennedy agreed, while meeting Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev at Vienna in June 1961, to consider a negotiated end to superpower confrontation over Laos. At the urging of the great powers, all Laotian factions agreed to a cease-fire. For the next 14 months, the negotiations over Laos continued, searching for an internal settlement that would lessen global tensions.

Then in May 1962, General Phoumi Nosavan, apparently concerned at the way diplomacy seemed to diminish US support, used a clash with communist Pathet Lao forces at Nam Tha Province in the country's remote northwest to claim, apparently falsely, that Chinese Communist forces had crossed the border – just as they had in Korea a decade earlier. Lacking accurate intelligence about this obscure quarter of the globe, the Kennedy White House, convinced that its mettle was being tested by the Soviets, went into crisis mode. Over a thousand US Marines advanced to the Lao border. The US Navy's Seventh Fleet took up battle stations off Thailand. A strategic reserve of four thousand more US troops arrived in Thailand. In case these forces failed, the White House planned nuclear attacks on China.

This crisis demonstrated the dangers when superpowers attached global significance to the volatile internal politics of such a fragile nation. Within weeks, the Kremlin expressed its support for neutralization, the Lao parties began to talk, and the world pulled back from the brink of nuclear war. On July 23 1962, the US delegation, led by the distinguished diplomat Averell Harriman, joined the Soviet Union and other parties to the conflict in signing an agreement at Geneva to respect Laos' neutrality and end all military operations inside the country. If observed, this agreement should have exempted Laos from any further role in the Cold War. The country's leading neutralist, Souvanna Phouma, again assumed office as prime minister with his authority now legitimated by this international agreement. With the signing of this neutralization accord, it became, within the loose fabric of international law, illegal for the United States to conduct any military operations in Laos.

In retrospect, Kennedy's withdrawal from Laos was a major strategic miscalculation. At the start of US intervention in Indochina in 1955, the Eisenhower administration, mindful of the region's geopolitical imperatives, had made Laos its primary bastion against communist infiltration into Southeast Asia. Reversing this policy, Kennedy pulled back from Cold War confrontation by neutralizing Laos in 1962 and then relied on aggressive counterinsurgency inside South Vietnam to contain communism. This policy change in Laos was, of course, part of Kennedy's global shift away from reliance upon conventional forces to contain communism in favor of his new "special warfare" doctrine of using US advisers to train local allies for counterinsurgency. But when counterinsurgency failed and the Vietnam War started two years later, there was no longer any restraint on North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam. Now treaty-bound to respect Laos's neutrality, Washington, was in an ambiguous, even contradictory, position – forced to intervene in a country where it could no longer intervene. Ambiguity forced improvization, leading the US to develop a new covert-warfare strategy that combined tribal mercenaries and massive air power as a substitute for the regular troops that it could no longer use inside Laos.

## Covert War

Within months of signing the Geneva agreement on Laos, the White House began practicing a policy that defied its spirit. On the surface, US foreign policy respected the neutrality of Laos and the Geneva accord. But still seeing Laos as one of four

"roads" for a Communist China invasion of Southeast Asia, the Kennedy administration decided that Vientiane had to be held in the Western camp at all costs – no matter what the Geneva agreement might say. Instead of backing the right wing as Eisenhower had done, the Kennedy administration decided to regain its influence in Laos by slowly pressing the neutralist government to adopt a more sympathetic position to the US military presence in Laos. Instead of trying to stigmatize Souvanna Phouma, the US courted him with aid and support. Simultaneously, communist forces defied the Geneva agreement and strengthened their forces inside Laos. Though the Soviet aircraft quickly left the Plain of Jars, the North Vietnamese troops remained inside Laos with the Pathet Lao, soon supplemented by several thousand more Vietnamese troops.

As the war inside Vietnam escalated, the neutralization of Laos under the Geneva accord of 1962 would force the United States to use covert air and ground operations to conceal its intervention. Neutralization thus fostered many of the contradictions and contortions for the US presence in Laos – the clandestine bombing, the CIA's reliance on its "Secret Army" of Hmong guerrillas, and the concealment of these operations from the American public. After agreeing at Geneva in 1962 to end all military operations inside Laos, Washington soon found that the escalating war along the Vietnam–Laotian border made intervention in Laos a military imperative. Covert warfare became Washington's solution to this diplomatic conundrum. Thus, by mid 1964 the White House, working through the CIA, was again intervening in Laos through covert operations that maintained the facade of "plausible deniability."

Soon after his inauguration in 1961, President Kennedy had ordered the CIA to support the right-wing military factions through covert operations. Using US Army Special Forces as trainers, the Agency began to expand its clandestine force of Hmong irregulars commanded by Major Vang Pao, a middle-ranking Hmong officer in the Royal Lao Army. In the months after Geneva, particularly in 1963–4, the CIA sparked local conflict between its Hmong irregulars and Pathet Lao forces around the strategically-sited Plain of Jars in northeastern Laos. As the fighting in South Vietnam escalated, right-wing factions in the Royal Lao Army, backed by the CIA, launched a coup in April 1964, forcing Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma into a coalition government. Simultaneously, the CIA began transforming its 9,000 strong Hmong militia into the Secret Army, or *Armée Clandestine*, with 30,000 men, using this covert-action asset to harass the Pathet Lao forces on the Plain of Jars.

These tensions soon erupted into conflict. In mid May, the Pathet Lao forces, reacting to the right-wing's April coup, drove Kong Le's neutralist forces off the Plain of Jars and installed a local revolutionary regime. Within days, the CIA's "A Team," civilian American pilots flying T-28 propeller-aircraft painted with Lao Air Force markings, began bombing communist positions on the Plain of Jars. In June, Pathet Lao gunners shot down two US jets on reconnaissance flights, sparking a sporadic US bombing of the plain. By early 1965, the United States had started its secret bombing of Laos and the CIA's Secret Army were fighting Pathet Lao forces around the Plain of Jars.

The history of CIA's long covert alliance with the Hmong people of northern Laos is perhaps the most complex and morally ambiguous relationship between the United

States and any of its Indochina allies. When the CIA began to intervene in Laos during the late 1950s, there were an estimated 290,000 Hmong people living in the mountains of northern Laos – about eight percent of the country's population of three million. Divided into tribes and clans, the Hmong were the most isolated of Laos's ethnic groups. Instead of living on the plains or upland valleys like the Lao or Tai, the Hmong clung to the mountain peaks, building their villages of plank-houses at elevations of 3,000 to 5,000 feet. From the green valley floors of northern Laos, cliffs soar skyward – with silvery threads of water falling down and tiny trees reaching up from limestone faults to ridges and peaks where the Hmong built their houses.

The Hmong economy was a mix of subsistence and cash crops. For subsistence, their farmers grew sticky rice through slash-and-burn cultivation. For cash, they cultivated the opium poppy – scraping the sap and selling the bundles of jelly-like narcotic to itinerant Yunnan Chinese merchants who moved through the mountains leading strings of pack horses. Within this mix of cash and subsistence, there was a gender-based division of labor. Men felled trees with axes and burned off the brush to clear the fields, while women planted the crops and did most of the harvesting, whether cutting the rice stalks or scraping the poppy bulbs.

But to portray the Hmong as tribal innocents, some of Rousseau's latter-day "noble savages" in the hills of Southeast Asia, would do them an injustice – in effect, to deny them a role in the making of their own history. To summarize very broadly, the Hmong alliance with America served the interests of certain elements in both societies that controlled the relationship. In allying with the Hmong, the CIA acquired tribal warriors ideally suited to clandestine warfare in a remote and extraordinarily difficult terrain where there were few alternative allies. As natives of these rugged mountains, Hmong males had the habit of long journeys for hunting and warfare that made them ideal guerrillas. Since they were a tribe, not a nation, CIA operatives could negotiate with Hmong leaders without incurring any formal diplomatic obligations.

Instead of a rigid hierarchy of nobles or king, the Hmong had a decentralized social structure of tribes and clans that engendered intense, protracted local rivalries. Since the prime political objective of Hmong clan leaders was to defeat internal rivals, they actively sought alliances with powerful external patrons who could reinforce their local power. From the Hmong perspective, the CIA was just another foreign patron, like the French, who could provide guns and food in exchange for soldiers and support.

What the Hmong did not understand, however, was that the CIA was not just another foreign ally. Through its growing expertise in covert warfare, the agency was developing techniques for the manipulation of tribal mercenaries to extract maximum casualties for minimum payment. In sum, the Americans could manipulate the Hmong more effectively than any of their previous patrons – whether Chinese, French, Vietnamese, or Lao – paying less silver for more blood than ever before.

Hmong involvement in the Indochina conflict had began in the final months of World War II when French commandos operating from India established a guerrilla *maquis*, or liberated zone, among the Hmong of northern Laos. When the French had first conquered Laos in the 1890s, the leading Hmong factions at the eastern

edge of the Plain of Jars, the Ly and the Lo clans, had aligned themselves with the new regime, seeking external support in their struggles against local rivals. For several decades before the war, the Ly influence grew steadily from French patronage and the Lo lost power – their rivalry intensifying through a host of incidents, petty and substantial. When French commandos parachuted into the Plain of Jars at the end of World War II, they soon found allies among their former political clients, the Ly clan, now led by a rising French-educated politician named Touby Lyfoung. Once one or two Hmong clans took up arms to aid a few French commandos, the tribe became inextricably enmeshed, through internal divisions and external alliances, as partisans in an escalating Indochina conflict.

Just as one Hmong faction led by Touby Lyfoung sided with the French, so the rival Lo clan, under an ambitious young chief named Lo Faydang, allied with the communist Pathet Lao during the France's Indochina War (1946–54). When the Viet Minh attacked Laos in 1952, the Hmong of eastern Xieng Khouang Province, led by Touby Lyfuong, enlisted on the side of the French and later served them as local guerrillas in the losing battle at nearby Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Only four years after the French withdrawal in 1954, the CIA recruited the Hmong as an effective, anticommunist force in northern Laos. Instead of dealing exclusively with Touby Lyfuong as the French had done, the CIA found a new leader in Vang Pao, then an obscure Hmong officer in the Royal Lao Army who compensated for his lack of traditional status with an extraordinary enthusiasm for combat. Through a complex process that we do not fully understand, Vang Pao would use the CIA's arms, finance, and air support to recruit many Hmong villages into a Secret Army that numbered 30,000 tribal guerrillas by the mid 1960s.

## Overview of War

As fighting in South Vietnam intensified in 1964–5, the White House authorized clandestine bombing inside neutral Laos to interdict the communist lines of communication between North and South Vietnam. Accordingly, in March 1965 the Johnson administration approved two distinct air operations in Laos with separate command structures: "Operation Steel Tiger" to block enemy infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos; and "Operation Barrel Roll" to support ground forces in northern Laos.

By late 1965, these decisions had created four main elements to America's secret war in Laos. Most importantly, in southern Laos the US Air Force launched a massive strategic bombing campaign against the Ho Chi Minh trail, seeking desperately to slow the flow of North Vietnam's men and material into South Vietnam. In the north, US Air Force tactical fighters, flying from bases in northeastern Thailand, engulfed the mountains surrounding the Plain of Jars in a spreading fire storm. Backed by this tactical air support, the CIA's Secret Army of 30,000 Hmong guerrillas fought most of the battles for the ridges of northeastern Laos following the ebb and flow of the monsoon rains – the CIA hill-tribe militia advancing under air cover in the wet season and the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies recovering lost ground in the dry months. On nearby battlefields in northern Laos,

the Royal Lao Army fought a conventional war against the Pathet Lao forces, usually mounting desultory defense of the main roads or royal capital.

By the end of the Vietnam War, Laos had become the world's most heavily bombed nation. Between 1965 and 1971, Laos, an impoverished country with only three million people, absorbed 1,600,000 tons of bombs – 10 times the 160,000 tons dropped on Japan throughout World War II. By the time the bombing stopped in April 1973, the US Air Force, after nine years of bombing, had dropped an unimaginable 2.1 million tons on Laos – a figure equal to the total Allied tonnage of 2.1 million tons of conventional bombs dropped on both Germany and Japan in all of World War II.

As the Vietnam War escalated, the US Air Force expanded its air operations over southern Laos until they became a massive air war with 3,000 sorties per month by late 1967. For the next five years, the US Air Force conducted a high-tech, electronic bombing campaign against the truck convoys on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At a peak cost of $800 million per annum, the US Air Force dropped thousands of electronic sensors across the mountains of southern Laos camouflaged as plants to detect the sound, vibration, or heat that might indicate North Vietnamese trucks moving south with men and material. As these sensors broadcast their electronic noise, a computer bank under "Operation Igloo White" at the US Air Force base in Nakhon Phanom, in northeastern Thailand, processed the acoustic and seismic pulses to create a line of light called "the worm" on the visual monitor of an US Air Force technician. After computations to determine the worm's position, its coordinates were then fed to US fighter bombers that, night after night, dropped tons of bombs on the supposed truck convoys moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. From October 1970 to May 1971, US Air Force claimed destruction of 25,000 North Vietnamese trucks in southern Laos. The Igloo White computers said there was a truck, Air Force night bombers reported dropping bombs where the truck was supposed to be, and the US Air Force reported that this invisible truck must have been destroyed. Indeed, it had been destroyed. But there was only one problem with this impressive yield: the US Air Force could never produce the visual evidence, photographs or sightings, that proved such destruction. If a small area like southern Laos had been, in fact, littered with the charred, smoking ruins of 25,000 trucks, it should have produced visual evidence of a spectacular visibility.

Within this extraordinary total of 2.1 million tons, some 500,000 tons were concentrated inside a narrow, hundred-mile corridor in northern Laos that reached from North Vietnam's border, across the communist-controlled Sam Neua Province, to the Plain of Jars. From 1964 to 1971, the Plain of Jars region became the main battlefield between the CIA's Secret Army and the Pathet Lao guerrillas. At the start of this massive bombardment, this plain had a population of some 50,000 peasants, villages made of bamboo and thatch, a few market towns with medieval Buddhist temples, and clusters of massive stone jars on the hillsides hinting at the ancient origins of the local Lao Phoueun civilization. The plain is a diamond-shaped plateau, 3,500 feet in elevation, with rolling grasslands 40 miles wide and encircled by ragged ridges, covered with heavy forests and scattered Hmong villages, that soar upward to peaks of 5,000, 8,000, and 9,000 feet elevation. The old French colonial Route 7, the

main road from northern Laos to North Vietnam, crosses the plain from west to east, while smaller roads lead north and south to adjacent Laotian provinces and trails climb up the ridges to Hmong villages. Within the often impenetrable mountains of northeastern Laos, the Plain of Jars was thus a cross-roads, a strategic prize for both the communist forces in the caves of Sam Neua Province just to the northeast and the CIA secret army based at Long Tieng valley just to the southwest.

Thus, the ultimate aim of US air operations was to block the communist advance across the Plain of Jars towards the Royal Lao government's capital at Vientiane only a hundred miles further south. If the communists had somehow captured the capital while the war in Vietnam raged, then they could, under the 1962 Geneva agreement, demand an end to the US bombing campaign against the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos and end any possible chance of an American victory in Vietnam.

After the Pathet Lao captured the Plain of Jars in mid 1964, the White House made it a free-fire zone and expanded the air war – increasing its own tonnage and arming the Laotian Air Force with an additional T-28 fighter-bombers and C-47 gunships. By late 1964, the US Air Force stationed seventy-five fighter-bombers in northern Thailand for "Operation Barrel Roll," the sustained but still clandestine bombing of northeastern Laos. Four years later, as the fighting for the Plain of Jars intensified, US bombers flying out of Thailand dropped some 230,000 tons of bombs on northern Laos. By 1969, the US Air Force was flying 300 bombing sorties a day over northern Laos in support of the CIA's Secret Army. Following the pace of ground warfare, the bombing intensified in 1970–1, with the first use of B-52 strategic bombers, and then tapered off until the cessation of US combat operations in 1973. By war's end, this Plain of Jars, a small region with poor highland farms and no infrastructure, received over three times the total dropped on industrial Japan, becoming the most intensely bombarded place on the face of the planet.

As the air war intensified from 1964 to 1971, the US embassy in Vientiane, without effective oversight from the White House or Pentagon, controlled this massive bombardment and managed to conceal it from the US Congress and the public. After US military operations in South Vietnam escalated in 1964, President Johnson appointed William Sullivan, a career diplomat who had negotiated the neutralization of Laos two years before, as his ambassador in Vientiane. During his five years in his post, Sullivan, known as the "Field Marshall" among senior US military in Saigon, took command of the air war and expanded it from a few clandestine CIA bombing runs into the largest aerial bombardments in military history. Under instructions from the White House, Sullivan won Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's tacit consent for a clandestine bombing of Laos in December 1964 and then assembled an *ad hoc* command structure that placed the US Embassy at the epicenter of this air war. While the US Air Force directed the strategic bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos, Ambassador Sullivan and his successor, G. McMurtrie Godley, controlled the tactical bombing against communist forces in the northern mountains around the Plain of Jars.

In this tight command structure designed for maximum secrecy, US Air Force Forward Air Controllers known as "the Ravens," flying at low elevations, radioed possible targets to the main CIA base Long Tieng; inside the Embassy the US Air

Force attaché, Colonel Robert Tyrell, and the CIA station chief endorsed the targets to Ambassador Sullivan; and, once he approved, Colonel Tyrell contacted the 7/13 Air Force command across the Mekong River at Udorn, to dispatch the fighter-bombers. As bombing sorties rose from 4,658 in 1965 to 7,316 in 1966, the costs escalated and the White House kept Congress ignorant by shifting funds from other military and intelligence accounts. For nearly six years, the US Embassy directed one of history's largest air wars, concealing it from both Congress and the international community to preserve the fiction of US compliance with Laotian neutrality.

The truth did not emerge until October 1969 when Senator Stuart Symington chaired closed-door hearings in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that remained, like the war itself, secret for another six months until heavily-edited transcripts were finally released. In their testimony, American officials claimed that great care was taken to avoid civilian casualties. Called to explain his management of the bombing, Ambassador William Sullivan minimized its extent: "The United States Air Force contribution was limited to striking at the logistic routes ... or at points of concentration which into the area where the actual ground battling was taking place ...it was the policy not to attack populated areas." His Air Force attaché Colonel Tyrrell was even bolder: "Villages, even in a freedrop zone, would be restricted from bombing." Congress was not satisfied, and two years later Senator Symington won passage of legislation setting a $350 million ceiling on all US aid to Laos, effectively re-asserting legislative control over this secret war and its financial legerdemain.

Viewed in retrospect, it would seem that managing such a massive air war outside the regular Air Force command, with only a small staff of attachés and CIA agents to clear targets and conduct post-attack assessments, probably allowed a wide latitude for error – particularly as the sorties climbed into the hundreds every day. In late 1971, the US Senate Subcommittee on Refugees reported that "the sheer volume and constancy of bombing activity since 1968 makes effective control of these strikes almost impossible." Taking a bleaker view of the US air war, the few American journalists covering the war generally agreed, as reporter Robert Shaplen put it, that the aim of the US bombing in northern Laos was "to destroy the social and economic fabric of Pathet Lao areas."

During its ten years of full combat, the CIA's Secret Army relied upon a relatively simple structure to maintain a remarkably efficient army suited to the harsh mountain warfare in northern Laos. From its secret base at Long Tieng valley, just south of the Plain of Jars, the CIA controlled a largely Hmong guerrilla army under the operational command of General Vang Pao, a Hmong career officer in the Royal Lao Army. Through a self-contained radio net and a shuttle service of helicopters and light aircraft, the CIA ferried men and material from Long Tieng to over 200 air strips near Hmong villages on ridges and mountains scattered across northeastern Laos. To avoid Congressional scrutiny, the entire CIA operation was concealed within the large US Agency for International Development (USAID) bureaucracy as an humanitarian relief operation for war refugees.

To mask the scale of the CIA's military operations at Long Tieng, USAID maintained an refugee relief center at nearby Sam Thong where journalists and official visitors from Washington could tour hospitals, schools, and food distribution centers

under the gruff gaze of its legendary director, Edgar "Pop" Buell, an Indiana corn farmer who gave his life to this anticommunist cause. Hmong villages that provided recruits were rewarded with regular rations of rice and protein, delivered by USAID which contracted the CIA's own airline, Air America, to drop the goods from C-130 cargo aircraft. CIA officers, many seconded from the US Army's Special Forces, worked with the Hmong guerrillas, training them in weapons, tactics, communications, and sabotage.

This Secret Army, or *Armée Clandestine*, was charged with three main missions: to fight the Pathet Lao advance in northern Laos, thus maintaining a covert US military presence without violating the country's neutrality; conduct intelligence operations along the border with North Vietnam; and, finally, to defend critical American installations such as the secret guidance facility at Phou Pha Thi near the North Vietnamese border.

Although this secret war was fought on the ground by tribal guerrillas, it was held together by one of the most remarkable air armadas in the history of warfare. To tie these scattered mountain-top villages into people armed, the CIA's Air America had a fleet of agile U-10 Heliocouriers, an aircraft designed by the Swiss to land on Alpine peaks. As the war expanded, the CIA brought in helicopter gunships and cargo aircraft to increase Hmong air mobility and provide tactical air support. To air drop supplies to the Hmong villages, the CIA used C-130 transports with rear doors and cargo kickers – the working grunts of this air war. The Royal Lao Air Force operated squadrons of antiquated T-28 propeller trainers that were effective in close support bombing. Flying out of bases in nearby northeast Thailand, wings of US Air Force fighter bombers pounded Laos during daylight hours. Later, after 1970, B-52 strategic bombers unleashed massive attacks on critical war zones, notably the Plain of Jars. After dusk, "Puff the Magic Dragon" replaced the jets and the bombers. By cutting gun-doors in the side of C-47s, a World War II vintage, two engine-transport, and arming them with rapid-fire naval machine guns, the US Air Force created the AC-47 gunship, known as the "Puff-the-Magic Dragon ship" – a killing machine with "people sniffers" that could detect concentrations of ammonia in mammal urine and guns that could unleash a hail of six-thousand rounds per minute upon the monkeys, water buffalo, guerrillas, or farmers in the darkness below. By 1971, one US diplomat, speaking with what scholar Charles Stevenson called "quietly expressed pride," felt that the United States had discovered a new strategic doctrine of using bombs as a replacement for ground forces in foreign intervention: "The Lao have shown us a new way of fighting a war."

Hiking in the hills of western Xieng Khouang Province in mid-1971, this historian became an accidental witness to the air war. As I reached Hmong villages in mountains at the western edge of the Plain of Jars, the intensity of this airwar etched a cat's cradle of bomber contrails into the azure blue of the highland sky above. Out of sight at 35,000 feet were the command-and-control craft that coordinated the air operations. Beneath them at 30,000 feet, the B-52s strategic bombers periodically dropped their racks of five-hundred pound bombs in fiery boxes. Next, still invisible to the naked eye, were the tankers hovering at 20,000 feet for refueling. During daylight hours, the contrails of the fighter bombers were always visible, flying to and

from their bombing runs at 10,00 feet. Hovering just above the plain at 2,000 to 5,000 feet were the "Raven" forward air controllers who spotted targets and radioed coordinates for suggested strikes. At night, as I slept in a Hmong village on the edge of the free-fire zone, the sound of the C-47 engines faded almost out of hearing, then became stronger as "Puff the Magic Dragon" passed nearby – a droning punctuated by occasional bursts as machine guns fired 6,000 rounds per minute whenever the "people sniffers" detected mammals in the dark. While this layered air armada hovered above the plain, night and day, for over five years, there were no US troops in the area and even the CIA's Hmong guerrillas only occasionally penetrated the Plain of Jars. Out of sight of Congress and the American people, the CIA and the US Air Force had created a new kind of mechanized battlefield that, in defiance of conventional military doctrine, had made air power alone an effective strategic weapon that took and held ground without any infantry.

After that night of listening to the droning gunships, I woke the next morning to find a group of twenty refugees, sitting dirty and tired midst bundles of their worldly goods, who had somehow emerged from that hail of gunfire. They were the remains of a larger group of villagers who had fled from the Moung Soi area on the Plain of Jars two weeks before to escape an air war that had forced them to live in caves and farm in the dark when the skies were free of the US fighters. Unable to survive in such conditions, some ninety villagers had started hiking west towards government territory. Twice at night during their march, the gunships had found them and fired. These twenty whom I met that morning, almost all women and children, were the only survivors.

Refugees from the Plain of Jars reacted to the air war with a mix of shock, displacement, and grief. In 1972, an American volunteer working in Laos, Fred Branfman, collected memoirs from ordinary refugees who had fled from the Plain of Jars and published them in a slender volume titled *Voices from the Plain of Jars.* In a hand-written statement, a twenty-one year-old farmer from the Plain of Jars expressed a wrenching sadness: "Before my village had prosperity and good homes for Laotian rice farmers .... But then came the present time, as we and our rice fields were hit by the planes and burned; our homes were hit and burned, our belongings completely lost. I think back and within me tears want to fall. But there are not enough. For I have fled from the village of my birth." A thirty-three year-old woman recalled the terror of living under the massive US bombing: "I saw this in the village of my birth, as every day and every night the planes came to drop bombs on us. We lived in holes to protect our lives ... I saw my cousin die in the field of death. My heart was most disturbed and my voice called out loudly as I ran to the houses. Thus, I saw life and death for the people on account of the war of many airplanes in the region of Xieng Khouang. Until there were no houses at all. And the cows and the buffaloes were dead. Until everything was leveled and you could see only the red, red ground. I think of this time and still I am afraid."

From meeting refugees and compiling their memoirs, Branfman concluded that the US bombing campaign destroyed human society on the Plain of Jars. Prior to the start of the air war in 1964, the Plain of Jars had been, in his words, a "picturesque and prosperous rural society of some fifty-thousand people" that had "long

been the largest fruit-producing and cattle raising area of Laos." Then, for over five years, the US Air Force launched a systematic assault upon this society, bombarding the plain with "white phosphorous, fragmentation, ball-bearing and flechette anti-personnel bombs, immediate and delayed-action high explosives." In 1970–1, the United States Information Service (USIS) interviewed 213 civilian refugees from the Plain of Jars and found that 96 percent had their villages bombed, 75 percent suffered damage to their homes, and 61 percent had seen a person killed by the bombing. While communist soldiers usually eluded the air attacks, it was these civilians who suffered heavily. In interviews with over a thousand refugees, Fred Branfman established the bombing took a "heavy toll on the civilian population" because they "could not survive on the run and had to remain near the villages: which were the targets most often hit." Under this unrestrained US bombing campaign, "village after village was leveled, countless people buried alive by high explosives, or burnt alive by napalm and white phosphorous, or riddled by anti-personnel bomb pellets." By 1969, "after a recorded history of 700 years," human civilization on the Plain of Jars had, in Branfman's view, "disappeared."

Twenty years after the end of the bombing, my own visit to the Plain of Jars in 1994 seemed to confirm Branfman's bleak assessment. Every vista was marked by bomb craters – criss-crossing the hills, scarring the valleys, and marching across the countryside through towns and villages. In Xiengkhouangville, the region's capital, Buddhist temples were still roofless rubble, as was the modest palace of the region's royal family. Population had not recovered, the maimed were omnipresent, and countless unexploded bombs and antipersonnel bomblets were still causing new casualties.

Shrouded in secrecy until 1971, the bombing of civilian targets could not arouse public opposition and became a model for later US intervention in Cambodia. In 1969, President Richard Nixon ordered secret B-52 bombing raids against communist sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia. After the US openly intervened in 1970, massive B-52 bombing raids on extensive, heavily-populated areas of central Cambodia became the main US weapon in blocking the communist capture of the capital. In short, the tactics of air warfare under the pressures of covert warfare in Laos became a standard military doctrine that the US Air Force applied in Cambodia and elsewhere.

## Tides of War

Although this clandestine war in northern Laos continued for ten years, it received almost no press coverage and remains, even a quarter-century later, the least understood chapter in America's Vietnam debacle. After the communist Pathet Lao forces attacked Captain Kong Le's neutralists and captured the Plain of Jars in 1964, two overlapping armies would battle for northeastern Laos – not a war of territory but of elevations. In the upland valleys, the Pathet Lao controlled much of the territory from North Vietnam's border to the Plain of Jars. Above them on the ridges and peaks, the CIA's Hmong guerrillas, supplied by Air America, clung to mountain peaks across the breadth of northern Laos all the way to the border of North Vietnam.

For eight years, this see-saw battle for the rugged northeast raged back-and-forth across a narrow 200-mile span of mountains from the capital at Vientiane, across the Plain of Jars, to North Vietnam's border. If the Pathet Lao had captured the capital in one of its annual offensives, then a new coalition government could have invoked the 1962 Geneva accords to force a suspension of all US air operations, particularly the massive bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos. North Vietnam's unmolested transit of men and material through Laos to South Vietnam would have been a critical blow to any American chances of victory in Vietnam. Though conducted in secrecy for over five years, this war for control of Laos's remote, rugged northeast was not a backwater or a sideshow. It was, in fact, central to the whole American war effort. Its battles were thus fought with an intensity that made them a maelstrom consuming all in its path – the Hmong militia, the Pathet Lao guerrillas, and the hapless civilians of the Plain of Jars. Even though this mountain warfare was also critical for the survival of the non-communist government in Vientiane, its lowland Lao conscripts in the regular Royal Lao Army units seemed to see these mountains as an alien terrain and simply refused to fight, often breaking ranks after brief contact with the enemy. Thus, the Hmong soldiers of General Vang Pao's Secret Army did almost all the fighting and all of the dying in this brutal mountain warfare.

In retrospect, there seem two distinct phases in this decade of war for control of northeastern Laos. From 1964 to 1968, the CIA used the Hmong Secret Army as defensive guerrilla forces to hold the highland ridges above the Plain of Jars and collect intelligence about communist operations. From 1969 to 1974, by contrast, the CIA deployed its Secret Army like conventional infantry and provided them with the tactical air support to launch offensives against the communist forces on the Plain of Jars.

During the initial guerrilla phase, the Hmong guerrillas performed reasonably well. But they could not stem the relentless pressure of disciplined communist infantry, a combined force of Pathet Lao guerrillas and regular North Vietnamese units. One-by-one, the CIA's mountain-top bastions ringing the Plain of Jars fell to determined communist attacks. In February 1964, 5,000 North Vietnamese troops captured the Hmong base on Phou Khe, a 7,000 foot mountain southwest of the plain, after a bloody fifteen-hour assault that routed the CIA's tribal allies. Two years later, a combined Pathet Lao–North Vietnamese assault overwhelmed Hmong defenders at Na Khang, an important CIA base northeast of the plain used to launch helicopter rescue missions for downed pilots inside North Vietnam.

The most important defeat came at Phou Pha Thi, a 5,800-foot eagle-nest mountain located just 17 miles from North Vietnam's border and 160 miles from Hanoi. When the US bombing over North Vietnam intensified in 1966, the US Air Force installed a sophisticated Tactical Air Navigation System (TACAN) on this mountain that proved capable of accurate, all-weather guidance for jets striking within 60 miles of Hanoi. The Air Force also used the base to launch helicopters into North Vietnam to rescue downed American pilots. To protect the system and its sixteen Air Force technicians, the CIA assigned 300 Secret Army guerrillas to guard the mountain and protected its approaches with an elaborate net of anti-personnel mines. During the 1968 Tet offensive in South Vietnam, the People's Liberation Army of Vietnam

and Pathet Lao launched a major offensive against the Secret Army's bases in Sam Neua Province.

The battle for this mountain was particularly bloody. As a high, eagle's nest plateau near the Vietnam border, Phou Pha Thi allowed US Air Force radar to "look down" over the whole Red River delta – greatly increasing the accuracy of the US bombing of North Vietnam. Determined to capture the installation, on March 11 1968 North Vietnamese soldiers scaled the mountain and attacked the installation, scattering the defenders and killing or capturing eleven American technicians. The CIA rescued three Americans by helicopter and then called in air strikes to destroy the valuable TACAN radar system.

Such combat was like placing a human hand on an anvil – with the hammer blows of Vietnamese and Pathet Lao offensives smashing the Hmong fingers against the rock face of these mountains. With nearly a thousand dead between January and March 1968, General Vang Pao's forces faced certain defeat in the northeast. Rather than let the Hmong villages remain under Pathet Lao control, the US Air Force increased its bombing and the CIA conducted a mass evacuation of all Hmong northeast of the Plain of Jars to refugee camps in the mountains further south. In retrospect, it seems that it was only the massive escalation in air operations that saved the Secret Army from defeat. Though many Hmong and Lao refugees were evacuated by air, others were forced into long, unplanned marches through mountain terrain that killed some ten percent of the villagers, usually the very old and very young.

As communist offensives intensified in 1969–70, the CIA converted General Vang Pao and his Hmong guerrillas into conventional ground troops and supplied them with massive tactical air support to mount a series of hard-fought offensives against communist forces on the Plain of Jars. When President Johnson proclaimed a bombing halt over North Vietnam in October 1968, the US Air Force used its now surplus bombing capacity to support the CIA's covert operations in northern Laos. After flying only fifteen or twenty sorties a day for four years, US fighter-bombers based in northern Thailand expanded operations to 300 sorties a day in 1969 and 1970, dropping some 230,000 tons of bombs on northern Laos. Gradually, the number of sorties dropped to around 100 a day until the bombing ended in mid 1973.

In the first of these conventional offensives in September 1969, the CIA, ignoring the high cost to the Hmong soldiers, threw these ill-trained tribal guerrillas into "Operation About Face," an assault against the battle-hardened North Vietnamese 316th Division dug in on the Plain of Jars. Backed by massive US air support reaching 200 sorties per day, General Vang Pao and his Secret Army temporarily captured much of the plain. After the bombing drove the Pathet Lao out of the provincial capital at Xieng Khouangville, Vang Pao's troops flew in, occupied the town, and seized massive communist supply caches. In anticipation of an enemy offensive, the CIA evacuated some 20,000 civilians from the Plain of Jars to refugee camps near the capital Vientiane. In early 1970, the communist forces counter-attacked, recapturing Xieng Khouangville and pushing south towards the main CIA base at Long Tieng. To blunt the attack, the US Air Force used B-52 strategic bombers in northern Laos for the first time, dropping over a thousand tons of bombs on the plain in

"boxes" up to two-miles long that incinerated all in their path. Undeterred by the massive bombing, the North Vietnamese pushed Vang Pao's forces off the plain in March 1970 and threatened Long Tieng. Their advance hit the heart of the Hmong army, forcing 110,000 refugees around the main CIA bases to evacuate further south into a forty-mile wide strip between Long Tieng and the Vientiane plain. After a massive air attack by gunships and bombers, the communist forces pulled back to the Plain of Jars within a few weeks.

In May 1971, General Vang Pao launched "Operation About Face II" and, again backed by massive US air power, managed to re-capture the Plain of Jars. These battles were his last victories. Henceforth, his Secret Army would be on a long, slow slide into defeat. Some six months later, the communist forces counter-attacked. Using 130 mm artillery to crush the Secret Army's defenses, some 12,000 Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops re-captured the Plain of Jars despite massive B-52 bombing and then forced Vang Pao's army further south, capturing the center of USAID refugee operations at Sam Thong and threatening the main CIA base at nearby Long Tieng. With over 50,000 Hmong refugees at their rear, General Vang Pao's 8,000 irregulars fought desperately, and successfully, for four months to defend the ridges surrounding Long Tieng. Although the US Air Force flew thousands of missions and used "smart bombs" to blast enemy artillery, the communist forces hung on until the onset of the monsoon rains again forced their withdrawal to the Plain of Jars. This fighting drove many of Hmong villagers further south, compressing some 150,000 refugees into that narrow crescent between Long Tieng and the Vientiane Plain. Since these evacuations were often ill-planned marches through mountains and jungle, the weakest Hmong, infants and elderly, died in great numbers. Hmong elders feel that each forced migration brought a heavy death rate to their villages – about 10 percent when the marches were orderly and up to 30 percent when refugees became lost in the forest.

During this second phase of conventional combat, the Hmong took casualties that strained their limited population which had numbered little more than a quarter million at the war's start. By late 1971, Vang Pao's army of 30,000 had been decimated with an estimated 3,300 killed and 5,400 wounded – about one-third of his combat forces. According to a US Air Force study: "By 1971, many families were down to the last surviving male (often a youth of 13 or 14), and survival of the tribe was becoming a major concern." As the Secret Army's ranks thinned, the CIA filled the depleted Hmong ranks with boy soldiers and Thai regulars – allowing Vang Pao's army to fight on.

As the devastating force of the US bombing campaign slowed and finally stopped in 1973, the war turned definitively against General Vang Pao and his Hmong infantry. In the war's final months, it was only the US Air Force that saved his forces from defeat. At the close of their final dry-season offensive in April 1972, the communist forces remained in the hills just north of Long Tieng, blocking Vang Pao's offensive when he then tried to advance under the cover of the annual monsoon rains. Six months later, as the communist forces mobilized from these nearby positions for an assault on Long Tieng, US Air Force's new F-111 fighters, deployed in Laos for the first time, used their night and all-weather instrumentation to bomb

enemy forces in the dark, while F-4s and B-52s continued their daylight attacks. Under such extraordinary round-the-clock bombardment, the communist forces finally pulled back to the Plain of Jars in December to wait for the expected cease-fire.

After the United States and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, the chief US negotiator, Henry Kissinger, advised Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma that American support for his government was winding down. A month later, the Royal Lao government and the communist Pathet Lao agreed to end the fighting and rule the country jointly. In April, after US B-52s bombed the Plain of Jars for the last time to support Vang Pao's forces, all US bombing in Laos ended. After the communists joined a coalition government at Vientiane that same month, the last CIA operatives flew out of Laos – leaving the Hmong crowded around Long Tieng without food or ammunition.

A year later, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces launched a major attack on General Vang Pao's base at Long Tieng. Unwilling to risk his shaky coalition with the communists, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma refused to support Vang Pao with his small Royal Laotian Air Force. On May 10 1975, Vang Pao and twelve Hmong elders issued a statement reminding the CIA of its past promises of protection and appealing for a mass evacuation of their Hmong followers to Thailand. But the Agency refused to mount a massive air lift. Finally, four days later, as Pathet Lao forces closed in on Long Tieng, the CIA flew Vang Pao and his family to Thailand – their first step on the road to exile in America. In December, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party dropped its nationalist Pathet Lao facade, abolished the 600 year-old monarchy, and established a Marxist regime – the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Despite these crippling losses in the last four years of war, Vang Pao was able to extract new recruits from the Hmong villages and kept fighting until the war's end in 1974. By 1969, 30 percent of Vang Pao's recruits were under the age of fourteen. By 1971, heavy casualties forced Vang Pao to draw almost all his recruits from the ten to fourteen age bracket. Faced with such heavy casualties, why did the Hmong continue to give their children to the CIA's Secret Army? The answer lies in the nature of the agency's relationship with Vang Pao and, in turn, his controls over the Hmong.

## Dynamics of Covert War

Throughout fifteen years of secret war (1960–74), the CIA's relationship with Vang Pao was the key to its covert operations. Although the Hmong had allied with the French, their traditional leader, the *kaitong* or chief Touby Lyfoung, had been unwilling to take heavy casualties. Speaking with elderly Hmong commanders in the early 1970s, they recalled with fondness how Touby took the French arms but usually ordered retreat at the first sign of heavy combat. In this colonial exchange relationship, the Hmong, under Touby's leadership, paid little blood for a considerable reward in guns, silver, and rice.

Instead of a traditional leader with the political authority and autonomy to manipulate the alliance, the CIA selected an ordinary Hmong officer, Major Vang Pao, and used its influence to transform him into a powerful patron among the Hmong

villages. Over the long years of their alliance, the CIA arranged Vang Pao's promotion from major to general in the Laotian Army, a rank that gave him a non-traditional kind of prestige. Invested with state authority and massive foreign resources, Vang Pao became an effective tribal broker who mobilized his people for protracted war. Since Vang Pao's authority came from his external patrons, rather than local prestige, he was more responsive to foreign pressure for combat and casualties. Under his leadership, the balance in clientelist exchange shifted markedly, and Hmong soldiers would now shed considerable blood to earn their guns, rice, and cash.

As the success of its secret war became dependent upon Vang Pao, the CIA used several tactics to raise his prestige among the Hmong – most importantly, by giving him the resources to become a powerful patron, and, secondarily, by encouraging his alliance with more traditional tribal elite, notably the Hmong cabinet minister Touby Lyfoung. In its initial report on the Hmong army to the White House in 1961, the CIA stated that "political leadership . . . is in the hands of Touby Lyfoung, who now operates mostly out of Vientiane" and "the military leader is Lt-Col Vang Pao, who is field commander." As CIA director William Colby later explained, the agency promoted Vang Pao as a "new breed of tribal leadership," but simultaneously encouraged "the expression of external deference to the old leaders." Accordingly, when the war intensified in the late 1960s Vang Pao acquired the vestiges of traditional legitimacy by arranging for his son and daughter to marry the children of Touby Lyfoung, who still had the authority of a traditional *kaitong* or chief. These maneuvers did raise Vang Pao's prestige, but it was the material and coercive aspects of his relationship with the tribe that would remain paramount.

To prosecute a war that offered the ordinary Hmong soldier little more than rice and death, the CIA gave its client General Vang Pao control over all air transport into tribal villages scattered across northern Laos. In effect, the general held power over the shipment of rice, the tribe's main subsistence commodity, into the villages; and the transport of opium, the tribe's only cash crop, out to markets in Vientiane and beyond. With a choke-hold over the economic essentials of every Hmong household, General Vang Pao imposed a centralized command over this disparate tribe, quickly elevating himself from a minor officer into a powerful tribal warlord who could extract boy soldiers for the slaughter in this hopeless war. Through these mechanisms, the CIA, through Vang Pao, transformed the Hmong from a scattering of clans and households into a unified people mobilized for war.

Until the start of the war, the traditional Hmong economy, as discussed above, had depended upon rice production for subsistence and opium cultivation for cash. Through its air power, the CIA allowed Vang Pao to take control of both. As the fighting withdrew Hmong males from the villages, the slash-and-burn rice fields soon lost their fertility after one or two harvests. The younger males, who in ordinary times would have cleared forests for new fields, were dead, wounded, or away at war. With each monsoon cycle of fighting and planting, the villages became increasingly dependent upon USAID air drops of rice – shipments that Vang Pao controlled. As fighting swept through the valleys and Chinese traders could no longer reach the villages with their strings of highland horses to buy the opium, Vang Pao also used the CIA's Air America to collect the bundles of raw narcotic from the villages and

transport it to market. Though long a significant source of cash for the Hmong, the opium poppy's importance increased since its fields remained fertile for up to ten years and the harvest could compensate, in part, for the decline in household income from the loss of male labor.

Within this complex exchange relationship, Vang Pao won considerable authority and proved skillful in manipulating his CIA advisers. "CIA had identified an officer... originally trained by the French, who had not only the courage but also the political acumen... for leadership in such a conflict...," recalled retired director William Colby. "His name was Vang Pao, and he had the enthusiastic admiration of the CIA officers, who knew him... as a man who... knew how to say no as well as yes to Americans." Many CIA field operatives admired his ruthlessness. When agent Thomas Clines, commander of the CIA's secret base at Long Tieng, demanded an immediate interrogation of six prisoners, Vang Pao ordered them executed on the spot. Clines was impressed. "What I meant to say, general, is that I would *appreciate* it if you would *allow* us to interrogate prisoners, *please*."

Since opium reinforced Vang Pao's authority, pragmatism dictated that the CIA should tolerate the traffic. While this compromise might have been understandable at the outset in 1960 or even in 1965, it became less comprehensible when the Agency's Laotian allies began producing heroin for US combat forces fighting in South Vietnam. In 1968–9, CIA clients opened a cluster of heroin laboratories in the Golden Triangle – the tri-border region where Burma, Thailand, and Laos converge. When Hmong officers loaded opium on the CIA's own Air America and the commander of the Lao Army, General Ouane Rattikone, opened a major heroin laboratory to supply US troops in South Vietnam, the Agency was silent. In a secret internal report compiled in 1972, the CIA's Inspector General explained the reasons for the Agency's inaction: "The past involvement of many of these officers in drugs is well known, yet their goodwill... considerably facilitates the military activities of Agency-supported irregulars." Instead of trying to restrain drug trafficking by its Laotian assets, the agency engaged in concealment.

How did these political dynamics allow Vang Pao to extract boy soldiers from their families for near certain slaughter in a losing war, one in which the Hmong had, at best, an ambiguous stake? When the war turned against the CIA in 1968–9 and the secret army started suffering heavy casualties, the general held the economic and military levers to extract thirteen and fourteen-year old recruits from the villages to renew his ranks. In 1971, I hiked into Long Pot district, west of the Plain of Jars, where most able-bodied males between the age of 15 and 40 had been wounded or killed in seven years of guerrilla warfare. When the Hmong district leader refused Long Tieng's orders to deliver the fourteen year olds, Vang Pao sent a non-local team of intelligence operatives with a radio into the village to monitor this quiet revolt. Acting on his orders, USAID stopped its rice deliveries to the village even though they were supposed to be humanitarian relief goods. By the time I arrived, the village had been without rice deliveries for a month and hunger was evident in the distended bellies of the children. The pressure on the village was enormous – send the boy soldiers or starve. The same high casualties that forced Vang Pao to demand boy soldiers from Long Pot also denied the village the labor that it needed to remain

World. If, however, we view our involvement through the prism of bilateral Lao–American, or Hmong–American relations, then US policy seems manipulative, even exploitative.

Of more lasting importance, America's bombing of northern Laos seems a clear violation of the 1949 Geneva Convention on "the protection of civilian persons in time of war." Although silent on specific rules for air warfare, the Convention, as stated in Article 2, applies to "all cases of declared war or any other armed conflict," and requires, under Article 3, that "persons taking no active part in the hostilities... shall in all circumstances be treated humanely." Moreover, Article 3 specifically prohibits all "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture." Indeed, Article 16 provides that "the wounded and sick, as well as the infirm, and expectant mothers, shall be the object of particular protection and respect." When it signed the agreement on August 12 1949, the United States stated formally "it fully supports the objectives of this Convention" and "reserved the right to impose the death penalty" for any violations.

Within these protections of all non-combatants, the massive US bombing of the Plain of Jars and the consequent destruction of this society would seem a clear violation of the Geneva Convention. Since the United States remained the world's leading power at the end of the Vietnam War, and the victims from the Plain of Jars were among the world's very poorest, there were, of course, no complaints. Even if there had been, there was still no higher authority to investigate any American violations of the Geneva Convention. In answer to some hypothetical indictment, US Air Force commanders might have argued in their defense that the communist guerrillas lived in and among these innocent peasant farmers, making collateral damage an inevitability when using air power for counter-guerrilla operations. Such tactics and exculpatory logic, no matter how necessary they might seem to combatants in the heat of battle, are not, and were not, sanctioned within the 1949 Geneva Convention.

In the real world of the 1970s, there was no sovereign power nor any international body with the authority, much less the will, to call America to account for these crimes. Though perhaps more moral than most, the American state still acts as a state, maximizing its power and shirking accountability until pressed by some high authority within or without – whether an international tribunal or an aroused citizenry.

When a state fails to act morally, writers, acting as the voice of civil society, can sometimes stir a nation's collective conscience, forcing the state to correct its excesses. While the war still raged, a handful of activists and academics raised the moral and legal implications of the air war and its disproportionate force. Coming to Laos as a rural development worker with International Voluntary Services (IVS), a private Peace Corps, Walt Haney had first-hand contact with the impact of the air war on Lao villagers. In the summer of 1970, Haney led Lao students in working with refugees from the Plain of Jars. In these camps, he heard disturbing stories of their life under the bombs. After Haney wrote the US Ambassador, G. McMurtrie Godley, recounting how US aircraft "would shoot or bomb any people they saw," the ambassador called him for a private meeting that November, insisting that American jets "adhere to strict rules of engagement which proscribe the bombing of inhabited

villages except under highly unusual circumstances." During his school vacation that December, Haney went back to the refugee camps for a systematic survey, discovering, significantly, that 58 of the 74 villagers interviewed had witnessed bombing attacks when no communist soldiers were nearby.

After returning to America, Haney became a staffer on the US Senate Subcommittee on Refugees, compiling its survey of civilian casualties on the Plain of Jars. In an essay on US involvement in Laos for the Beacon Press edition of *The Pentagon Papers*, Haney documented the secrecy and deception used to mount the secret air war over Laos. After immersion in these classified documents, he tried to reconcile their tough *realpolitik* with the suffering he had seen among refugees from the Plain of Jars: "Reading these things my mind goes back to some of the people I met in Laos. I recall a refugee named Xieng Som Di, who returned . . . from working in his rice fields only to find that his village had been bombed. His house and all his possessions were destroyed, and his mother, father, wife and all three of his children had died in the bombing raid." In an angry conclusion, Haney charged that "the U.S. Executive has rained down literally billions of dollars worth of bombs on a country with whom the United States is not at war and without Congressional or international sanctions."

Like his friend Walt Haney, Fred Branfman first came to Laos as an IVS volunteer and thus became another accidental witness to the air war, later returning home to write and speak about its devastation of Laos. Among his writings, *Voices from the Plain of Jars*, a collection of memoirs from the ordinary peasants who suffered this death and destruction, stands as an eloquent indictment of the US bombing campaign. The book's frontispiece features a crumpled wedding photo of a peasant couple from the Plain of Jars, the bride wearing the hand-woven cloth and handcrafted silver belt of her culture, under the caption: "In memory of Sao Doumma, a twenty-five-years-old woman from the Plain of Jars, killed in a bombing raid in August, 1969 . . . and all the others." He warned that this air war "marks a new era in the history of military conflict: war which is not fought by men but machines, war which can erase distant and unseen societies clandestinely, unknown to and unsuspected by the world outside." After carefully documenting the way the US Air Force had destroyed a peasant society of 50,000 people on the Plain of Jars, Branfman probed for the moral implications of this brutal bombardment: "what does it mean when leaders of the richest and most technologically advanced nation in history use all their weaponry short of nuclear arms against rice farmers who pose the most marginal of challenges to their interests?" Though distributed by Harper & Row, one of the country's largest publishers, the book was not well advertised, received few reviews, and disappeared after a small print run.

Similarly, a group of scientists at Cornell University, led by physics professor Raphael Littauer and astronomer Carl Sagan, formed Project Air War and mustered the available evidence on the US bombing in Indochina. In 1972 they published a dense, detailed academic monograph that documented, among other topics, the extraordinary scale of the US bombing operations in Laos. Significantly, after reviewing international law, the authors concluded that the legal basis for US bombing in South Vietnam was "tenuous at best," but that "the legal case for

American bombing in the rest of Indochina is untenable." In their view, US air operations violated, to varying degrees, three central principles of international law: (1) proportionality between the damage caused and the anticipated military gain; (2) a prohibition on attacks against enemy civilians, medical installations, and undefended towns and cities; and, (3) a prohibition on weapons that cause unnecessary suffering. Most importantly, American bombing violated the general principle "that a reasonable proportionality exist between the damage caused and the military gain sought." More specifically, US air operations often violated rules of war that "prohibit direct attacks on enemy civilians." After a careful rule of possible justifications, the authors found: "The impropriety of much of the American bombing . . . has been due to the absence . . . of a military objective important enough to justify the destruction of entire towns and villages."

In his introduction to this report, Neil Sheehan, a Pulitzer prize-winning reporter for the *New York Times*, found that the American bombing has "reached the level of calculated slaughter which may gravely violate the laws of war, laws the United States has pledged itself to uphold and enforce." Writing in the direct, non-academic style of a journalist, he concluded: "The air war may constitute a massive war crime by the American government and its leaders."

Rejecting any prosecution of culpable American commanders, the Cornell scientists noted that "air warfare has been left almost totally unregulated." After World War I, which saw the first use of both tactical and strategic bombing, some legal experts endorsed by the Hague had drafted a set of "Rules of Aerial Warfare" in 1923. But not a single nation ratified the proposed convention, and the issue of air war was not addressed in the drafting of the Geneva Convention in 1949. While there were elaborate rules under the Hague and Geneva Conventions for both land and sea warfare, aerial combat, "the most significant instrument of destruction in contemporary armed conflict," had no specific rules or restrictions. To correct this historical failing, these scientists called on the major powers to negotiate new "treaties and conventions that permit detailed application of restraining rules and precise coverage." Although they came to Washington for a press conference and meetings with Congress, their report attracted little public attention and was soon forgotten.

By contrast, the few American writers who have engaged Laos in the quarter-century since the war's end have avoided any detailed analysis of the bombing and remained mute on its moral implications. Through a mix of evasion and justification, postwar writers have helped erase the memory and meaning of this bombing, and its criminal excess, from American consciousness. To cite one important example, in 1995 a leading New York publisher, Simon & Schuster, published *Back Fire*, a history of US covert operations in Laos by a young freelance writer, Roger Warner. Though the book is well researched and adds many new actors and anecdotes to our collective knowledge of this secret war, Warner ultimately fails to engage the two issues that seem to lie at the heart of his war story – the massive US bombing campaign over Laos and the CIA's alliance with the Hmong. In the course of his narrative, Warner leaves a trail of clues that the air war over Indochina set the US policy agenda for its secret war in Laos. Indeed, as Warner tells us, the United States dropped more bombs on Laos than it did on Germany or Japan during the whole of World War II.

Aside from a few stories about the use of tactical air in support of General Vang Pao, we learn little about these operations and even less about the vast strategic bombing effort in southern Laos. Most importantly, Warner never deals with the human or moral implications of these slender facts. In our bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan we were attacking advanced, urbanized societies with legitimate industrial targets and elaborate civil defense capacities. Moreover, we were in a legally defined state of war. In Laos, by contrast, we were bombing a neutralized nation with a scattered rural population. The sheer tonnage of bombs dropped over Laos, and the loose rules of engagement in this covert war, inflicted indiscriminate damage upon Laotian civilians. In striking contrast to Branfman's earlier work, the voices of the Lao villagers who suffered under this air war are silenced in Warner's book. In the end, this author refuses to engage the possibility that, in the 40 years of the Cold War, if the United States were guilty of one war crime then that might well have been our secret bombing of northern Laos.

Although much of the book is taken up with the story of the CIA's relations with General Vang Pao and his army of 30,000 Hmong guerrillas, Warner does not offer us any analysis of the political dynamics at play in this remarkable alliance between the Agency and a Southeast Asian hill tribe. The author, as an honest and careful reporter, offers us anecdote after anecdote of General Vang Pao's cowardice, corruption, brutality, and military incompetence – yet he never deals with the implications of these details. Why did the CIA continue to deal with him if he were so venal and incompetent?

The answer seems to lie in the *realpolitik* of the CIA's doctrine of plausible deniability, the Agency's standard practice around the globe during the Cold War. Within the patronage dynamics of proxy warfare in Laos, Vang Pao was the only Hmong willing to lead his people to the slaughter year after in a war they could never win. Through his fifteen-year alliance with the CIA, Vang Pao, born a poor member a weak tribal clan, rose to become the unchallenged lord of the Hmong people – commander of a 30,000 man army with its own aircraft and a wealthy man with five wives. In this bargain of blood for power, the CIA operatives whom Warner celebrates did not feel moved to expend their political capital to restrain the general's use of torture, systematic corruption, or drug dealing. For example, CIA agent Vint Lawrence, Warner's culturally-sensitive Ivy League graduate, learned that Vang Pao "kept prisoners sleeved in fifty-five-gallon barrels in holes in the ground and . . . was not averse to summarily executing prisoners or even offenders . . . from his own tribe." The general's "violent, brutal side" was useful to the CIA and so nothing was done to restrain it.

In the end, Warner's work fails to engage the profound moral and legal issues raised by the secret war in Laos. Instead of reflecting on these issues himself, the author lets the secret warriors have the final word. General Richard Secord, who was CIA–Air Force liaison in Laos and later achieved notoriety in the Iran–Contra scandal, tells us that we could have won the war if "we had bombed Vietnam back to the stone age." Former US Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan (1964–9), who supervised the most intense bombing in military history, feels no "personal anguish" for Laos and blames that country's suffering on the North Vietnamese whose "intentions were evil."

After the Cold War was over, Laos, Warner concludes, went back to being "its own sweet, goofy self" and Laotians "didn't hold a grudge for the destruction of their country." The book ends with a final anecdote about the quiet Texan Bill Lair who quit the CIA to become an interstate truck driver. After thousands of hours on the road thinking about Laos, he came to feel that "everything was supposed to turn out the way it did." If Cold War were a road movie, the author seems to say, then Laos was so much road kill – a little blood on the tires but nothing much to worry about. We can bask in our Cold War victory and forget the uncomfortable national self-examination that history has forced upon our former enemies in Eastern Europe and Russia. With our past so sanitized, we can now march into the future leading the new world order assured of our moral righteousness.

While Warner skirts the bombing, military historian Timothy Castle meets the issue head on. Without any of the national guilt or moral angst of Walt Haney and Fred Branfman, Castle, in his 1993 history, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, finds the US bombing fully justified. When describing combat between the CIA's Secret Army and the communist guerrillas in 1970, Castle notes that US B-52 strategic bombers were deployed over Laos for the first time, dropping "almost eleven hundred tons of munitions on the Plain of Jars." He then quotes, and apparently accepts, Fred Branfman's assertion that American bombing destroyed human society on the plain. Instead of analyzing such disproportionate force and its damage to non-combatants, Castle, ignoring the obvious superiority of US firepower, tries to make the communist forces equally culpable: "It should also be noted, however, that for many years the communist forces had bombarded the plain with substantial amounts of artillery and mortar fire." In his next paragraph, Castle recalls flying over the plain in September 1990 and being "startled" by the bombing scars still visible on the land: "I thought the water-filled craters resembled thousands of shiny coins. On the ground it seemed incongruous that such a quiet, cool, green plain could have been subjected to such a massive assault. But the steady stream of Vietnamese trucks that I saw headed down Route 7 were a quick reminder of why the area had been such an important target." Ignoring the 1949 Geneva Convention, Castle finds this massive, indiscriminate bombardment with heavy civilian casualties justified by the mere presence of enemy forces in the area.

Even the most experienced American war correspondent in Laos, Arthur J. Dommen, has failed to engage the full reality of the air war. Although he often exposed American excesses during his years of reporting Laos, Dommen's recent summing up of the secret war for Oxford's *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* seems a timid, even inadequate, engagement of the air war's enormity. In describing the fighting in northern Laos, Dommen remarks that the bombing was simply "another important factor in keeping the communists at bay." Summing up the terms of the 1973 cease-fire agreement that ended the US bombing, Dommen discusses the air war indirectly, almost parenthetically, as an operation "which had dropped almost 2.1 million tons of ordnance on Laos (more than the total tonnage dropped by the U.S. in the European and Pacific theaters in World War II)." In assessing the legacy of such destruction for postwar Laos, Dommen notes that the country faces problems of "political repression, lack of government funding for development projects, and

leftovers from the war," notably "the unexploded bombs left scattered about the countryside, which continued to take a toll on civilians, particularly in the north." In another entry on the Plain of Jars, the target of US Air Force saturation bombing attacks, Dommen is sparse with his words: "The plain was heavily bombed by U.S. planes, and unexploded ordnance continues to kill people in the area." Such muted prose seems unequal to what happened when the world's most powerful nation unleashed history's heaviest bombardment upon this impoverished peasant society.

Through the failure of American society to examine the moral and legal meaning of this air war, Laos has left a troubling legacy. Under the peculiar conditions of secret war, the Pentagon seems to have conducted an experiment in the use of air power for foreign intervention. In defiance of established military doctrine that only infantry can take or hold ground, the US Air Force used massive tactical bombing in northern Laos *without* effective ground forces to fulfill these missions. Instead of providing tactical support for the main strategic force, infantry, as it had in past wars, in Laos the Air Force itself was the sole strategic force. But to compensate for the absence of ground forces, this new strategy required an aerial bombardment of unprecedented intensity, producing a level of indiscriminate destruction that defied international law on proportionality between damage and objective.

Significantly, this air-war strategy, born of necessity in a secret war that barred the US from using infantry, gained an additional advantage in the post-Vietnam era – the minimization of American casualties. After suffering 58,000 dead in Vietnam, the postwar American public proved intolerant of casualties in foreign conflicts. This new air-war doctrine allowed maximum fire power for minimum casualties, making it an ideal prescription for that postwar malaise known as the "Vietnam syndrome" – a fear of suffering another costly, demoralizing defeat. Tested in Laos and perfected in Cambodia, this air-war doctrine would become central to US force-projection doctrine during the next quarter century. Of course, reducing American casualties with massive bombardment often meant increasing the collateral damage inflicted upon foreign civilians. Though such a strategy proved militarily effective and met domestic political imperatives, it placed the United States at variance with international law which was moving rapidly, in an opposite direction, to ban all indiscriminate force against civilian society.

After the Vietnam War, Washington ignored the call of the Cornell scientists for a new Geneva Convention to set rules for air warfare. There is a striking, and instructive, contrast between Congress's reaction to press exposés about environmental warfare and air war. In July 1972, the American press reported that the US military had tried to block North Vietnamese infiltration of South Vietnam by manipulating the weather over Indochina to flood strategic areas. After hearings confirmed these reports, the US Senate passed a resolution urging a treaty to ban environmental warfare. Consequently, Washington and Moscow negotiated the terms directly, and, in December 1976, the UN General Assembly approved the "Convention on the Prohibition of Military... Use of Environmental Modification Techniques." A few months later, the United States signed the convention. Some 53 nations have ratified this treaty, effectively banning environmental warfare. Simultaneous press exposés also prompted several Senate committees to investigate the bombing of civilians in

Laos. An angry Congress did force the White House to reduce the bombing over Indochina. But there was no Senate resolution for a new international convention on air war.

Even without leadership from the United States, the world community recognized that the 1949 Geneva Convention was no longer adequate for contemporary conflict – particularly, in guerrilla warfare where combatants are often indistinguishable from civilians. Starting in 1969, the International Red Cross moved to amend the Convention and the Swiss government convened a major diplomatic conference at Geneva in the mid-1970s to draft two supplemental protocols. While the 1949 Convention had made no mention of air war, Protocol I of 1977 applies specifically to "any land, air or sea warfare which may affect the civilian population." The original Convention had established the individual rights of certain protected persons (such as women, children, and prisoners). But Protocol I is much broader, banning both attacks on "the civilian population as such" and attacks on civilian infrastructure – whether agricultural, industrial, environmental, or cultural. Although the United States participated in the negotiations and signed the protocols in 1977, it failed, for over a decade, to join the world community in ratifying this war-crimes treaty and adapting its military tactics accordingly.

Finally, in January 1987, President Ronald Reagan sent a strongly-worded message to the Senate condemning Protocol I to the Geneva Convention and urging its rejection. By this time, 68 other nations had already ratified this treaty, making these protocols a new international standard for the conduct of war. Although the United States, the president explained, "has traditionally been in the forefront of efforts to... improve the international rules of humanitarian law in armed conflict," Protocol I was "fundamentally and irreconcilably flawed." The Pentagon, he reported, had found that "a number of the provisions of the Protocol are militarily unacceptable." On a similar note, Secretary of State George Schultz explained that the Pentagon found the Protocol "unreasonably restricts attacks against certain objects that traditionally have been considered legitimate military targets." Since certain of its provisions reflected "customary international law," the Secretary assured the Senate that the United States would "consult with our allies" to incorporate these into the "rules that govern our military operations." Though his language hints strongly that the Pentagon objected to new restrictions on its right to bomb civilian infrastructure, its report on the protocol remained "classified." For the first time since World War II, the United States had failed to ratify an international treaty on the rules of war. In a sharply worded reply, the senior legal advisor to the International Red Cross, Hans-Peter Gasser, said the US rejection of the Protocol "would deprive the world of a common framework for the humanitarian rules governing armed conflicts." Moreover, this rejection would, he said, "weaken the United States in its policy of working actively to gain respect for humanitarian law worldwide." Long a world leader on humanitarian issues, the United States now lagged far behind.

Without an open public debate over the moral implications of mass tactical bombing and the manipulation of minorities for covert warfare, Laos has instead served as something of a model for subsequent US foreign policy crises. When

President Reagan's advisors reviewed their foreign policy options in the early 1980s, they found Vietnam a failure but Laos a success. During the Central America crisis, the Reagan White House used CIA veterans of this secret war to mobilize anticommunist Contra guerrillas against Nicaragua's left-wing Sandinista government, sparking a divisive public debate over this covert warfare.

Similarly, under President William Clinton, massive application of air power, divorced from any commitment of US ground forces, would again become an instrument of US foreign policy in Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In 1999, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) tried to end atrocities in Kosovo by expelling Yugoslav troops, the US Air Force, in the most extreme application of this strategy, led NATO's punitive bombing of Yugoslavia's economic infrastructure. The damage from "smart bombs" in Belgrade pales before the B-52 "carpet-bombing" on the Plain of Jars. Even so, Amnesty International charged that some of the US attacks on Yugoslavia constituted a war crime. Human Rights Watch expressed concern about NATO air strikes, particularly, in the words of the *New York Times*, over "the use of cluster bombs near populated areas, attacks on civilian targets like factories or a major power plant, the bombing of a bridge near a busy market during daylight hours and air strikes against mobile targets (among them a column of refugees) from 15,000 feet without solid assurances that the targets were military." The UN's prosecutor for the Balkan war crimes tribunal considered, and then rejected, filing charges against NATO for this bombing campaign, arousing a deep antipathy inside the Pentagon to any international oversight of its operations.

A year later, in July 2000, delegations from a hundred nations gathered at the United Nations in New York to draw up a criminal code for a new International Criminal Tribunal. Appalled by a decade of brutal warfare – ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, genocide in Rwanda, mutilations in Sierra Leone, unrestrained bombardment of Chechnya – the world community was establishing the first international court that could punish war crimes and crimes against humanity. After over a half-century of leadership in this field, the United States, apparently concerned that its military might be indicted for future air operations like Yugoslavia, played a reluctant role.

During his administration's last days in December 2000, President Clinton signed the UN Convention for the International Criminal Tribunal and turned the matter over to an incoming Republican President who seems reluctant to proceed with ratification. In the thirty years since the United States violated the Geneva Convention by bombing civilian targets in Indochina, Washington has made air power central to its global force-projection capabilities. If the American public had recoiled from the sustained, unrestrained bombing of civilians in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, then Washington might have repudiated this strategy and taken the lead in drafting a new Geneva Convention on air war or ratified Protocol I and the International Criminal Tribunal. Instead, the American people remained largely ignorant of the secret US bombing of civilians during the Vietnam War, and have, in the decades since, forgotten the little they knew. Instead, Washington became wedded to a strategy of air warfare that violates the 1949 Geneva Convention and its later Protocols, weakening its leadership in the campaign for an international rule of law.

## REFERENCES

Branfman, Fred 1970: "Presidential War in Laos, 1964–1970," in, Nina S. Adams & Alfred W. McCoy, eds., *Laos: War and Revolution.* New York: Harper & Row, pp. 213–80.

Branfman, Fred 1972: *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War.* New York: Harper & Row.

Branfman, Fred 1978: *Village of the Deep Pond: Ban Xa Phang Mouk, Laos.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Brown, McAlister and Zasloff, Joseph J. 1986: *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Lao Communist Movement, 1930–1985.* Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

Castle, Timothy N. 1993: *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955–1975.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Colby, William 1978: *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Colby, William 1989: *Lost Victory.* Chicago: Contemporary Books.

Crossette, Barbara. 2000: "Parsing Degrees of Atrocity Within the Logic of Law," *The New York Times,* 8 July 2000, pp. A-15,17.

Dommen, Arthur J. 1971: *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization.* New York: Praeger, pp. 293–317.

Dommen, Arthur J. 2000: "Laos," in Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 221–3.

Dommen, Arthur J. 2000: "Plain of Jars," in Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History.* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 331.

Evans, Grant. 1983: *The Yellow Rainmakers.* London: Verso.

Gasser, Hans-Peter 1987: "An Appeal for Ratification by the United States," *American Journal of International Law* 81, no. 4 (October 1987), pp. 912–25.

Gunn, Geoffrey C. 1988: *Political Struggles in Laos (1930–1954): Vietnamese Communist Power and the Lao Struggle for National Independence.* Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol.

Haney, Walt 1972: "The Pentagon Papers and United States Involvement in Laos," in Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, eds., *The Pentagon Papers: Volume Five.* Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 248–93.

Littauer, Raphael and Norman Uphoff, eds. 1972: *The Air War in Indochina.* Boston: Beacon Press.

McCoy, Alfred W. 1974: "The Politics of the Poppy in Indochina: A Comparative Study of Patron–Client Relations under French and American Administrations," in Luiz R. S. Simmons and Abdul S. Said, eds., *Drugs Politics and Diplomacy: the International Connection.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 122–9.

McCoy, Alfred W. 1991: *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade.* New York: Lawrence Hill Books.

Powers, Thomas 1979: *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms & the CIA.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Quincy, Keith 1988: *Hmong: History of a People.* Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press.

Quincy, Keith. 2000: *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos.* Spokane: Eastern Washington University Press.

Robbins, Christopher 1979: *Air America: The Story of the CIA's Secret Airlines.* New York: Putnam.

Robbins, Christopher 1987: *The Ravens: The Men Who Flew in America's Secret War in Laos.* New York: Crown Publishers.

Roberts, Adam, and Richard Guelff 1989: *Documents on the Laws of War.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Senator Gravel Edition 1972: *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam, Volume II.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Stevenson, Charles A. 1972: *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Stuart-Fox, Martin 1997: *A History of Laos.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Toye, Hugh 1968: *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Warner, Roger 1995: *Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

U.S. Senate, 100th Congress, 1st Session 1987: *Protocol II Additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Noninternational Armed Conflicts.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, in, *Senate Treaty Documents Nos. 1–10: United States Congressional Serial Set.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1989, pp. iii–15.

Yang, Dao 1993: *Hmong at the Turning Point.* Minneapolis: World Bridge Associates.