The Secret War in Laos:
America's Time in South East Asia and its Impacts

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The Vietnam War was a tumultuous time in America's history. Summarized by brutal combat and civilian protest, the conflict remains an important part of our history. The war was not merely fought in Vietnam alone, however. A tiny landlocked country by the name of Laos shaped and determined many of the outcomes faced in South Vietnam. With the Ho Chi Minh trail running through northern Laos, the CIA took advantage of the Hmong hill tribe people to help fight against communism. More bombs were dropped on Laos during this period than on Germany and Japan combined during World War II. Despite this fact, many Americans still have little knowledge on Laos and the Secret War that transpired within its borders.

The secret war in Laos played out as though it were a wonderful piece of fiction. As history has shown itself to be stranger than fiction numerous times over, the tale involving the Kingdom of Laos during the Vietnam war is no different. And just as every good story has an extensive list of interesting and intricate characters, the conflict in Laos brings two particularly intricate individuals to light.

Colonel William Lair, after serving in World War II, Lair joined the CIA and during the Korean War was assigned to train the Thai national police in guerilla warfare. His purpose was to prepare a force of fighters to defend the Chinese southern border, should the conflict spread farther south (Warner 15). When his services were no longer necessary for training the Thai national police, Lair became a legitimate officer within the Thai police force and started training former students to form the Police Aerial Resupply Unit, or Paru. The Paru's purpose was to train rural villagers how to defend their settlements against gangs that occupied Thailand's countryside. Lair and his Paru would be an integral part of the training of hill tribe warriors. With each member speaking at least one other language, the unit as a whole would be self

sufficient (Hamilton-Merritt 79). Their skills would also be utilized in a large majority of the operations performed in Laos.

Vang Pao was another large asset to the success and execution of attacks against the Vietnamese within the borders of Laos. He was the face of the Hmong during the conflict, and in some respects is the best representation of Hmong in America. "His image - appears regularly in Hmong newspapers and on the walls of shops and homes" (Davey). Valued for his courage and bravery, he was always at the front of a battle giving orders and directing over missions. Stationed at Long Cheng with thousands of other Hmong, Vang Pao was only a helicopters ride away from wherever conflict might incur. General Vang Pao was present for the entire conflict in Laos and is currently residing in the United States after seeking exile after the communist takeover of Laos.

The Laotian conflict contains many intricacies and details. Hundreds of names, missions and areas could be mentioned and still one might not have a complete look into the Secret War. There are however, key moments and dates that summarize the conflict into manageable chunks. Without being too vague, summations of major events and themes during the war give a surprisingly solid view at how the conflict in Laos played out. Wanting to contain the spread of communism, America had invested small teams of CIA to help train the Hmong and rightists of Laos. Small scale attacks and guerrilla tactics were the staple of these trained units in the early 1960's. The organized Hmong attacked and disrupted communist units along the Ho Chi Minh trail within Laos. "The impetus for planning came from the field, not Washington…There was no bureaucracy" (Parker 57). With little bureaucracy to deal with, CIA operatives were free to control the operations as they saw necessary. As years passed the U.S. government became more

interested and involved in the affairs of Laos. More interest brought more funding, which brings us to the second stage of the Secret War in Laos. During the mid to late-1960's top secret weaponry was installed to allow for precision bombing during any type of weather. This equipment signified the transition from small scale to large scale resources being dumped into Laos. It also caused far more North Vietnamese troops to be stationed within the country. With its installation, the equipment atop Phou Pha Thi also transitioned in the third stage of the Laotian conflict. As Nixon entered office American sentiment against the war signified its decline. An apparent endless supply of NVA troops combined with the dwindling morale of Americans back home led to the final demise of American occupation in South East Asia. While not technically aligned with the Hmong, actions of the United States in Laos caused thousands upon thousands of Hmong to flee their homes. Allied with the CIA, Hmong fought and died to protect Laos. With the spread of communism the Hmong were forced out of their country and eventually resettled in America. As a final note, we will look at the impacts the Hmong have had on American culture since their immigration after the war. Just over 30 years after the United States entered the lives of the Hmong, they are now a permanent fixture in American society.

The secret war in Laos is also often referred to as the Laotian Civil War, due to the fact that there were primarily two groups within the country. The Pathet Lao, aligned with the Laotian neutralists, sided with Hanoi and the North Vietnamese (Hamilton-Merritt 9). United with America were the rightist Royal Lao Army and the Hmong. Throughout the conflict, both groups fought to hold important and strategic locations. Over the course of fighting, it would not be unusual for control of a single location to change factions several times. One important piece of land was the Plain of Jars."The importance of the plain is geographical. Though less than ten miles across, it is the biggest area in northern Laos that is flat, or close to flat. The few roads of

northern Laos converge in or near the Plain of Jars, and that makes it a favorite gathering point and logistical center for any army" (Warner 20). The Plain of Jars, PDJ, is a flat plateau named for the ancient jars found there. The PDJ was the sight of many bloody battles, as the flat land was both considered part of the Hmong homeland, as well as a strategic holding place for the North Vietnamese. One of the many hot spots fought over by each side, it perfectly represented the constant fight against communism by the Hmong and CIA.

Laos has had a turbulent past. As a landlocked country bordering Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and China, it has seen its fair share of conflict and foreign rule. Colonized by the French in 1893, Laos was not free of French rule until 1940. As France surrendered to Nazi Germany, Japan was given control of the mountainous nation until the end of the war in 1945. Although free of the Japanese, France continued to assert control on Laos until the conflict at Dien Bien Phu. As the Viet Minh defeated the French, the Geneva Accords are agreed upon by several countries. The Accords split Vietnam into two zones and stated that countries within Indochina were to be free of foreign rule (Hamilton Merritt 64). Many years later it is reaffirmed that Laos remain a neutral state during the Vietnam war. This affirmation called for zero foreign bases or troops to be located within Laos. Although the French had lost rule of Laos in 1954, French military still trained the Royal Lao army for another year. This position was replaced by the American Program Evaluation Office (PEO) which was run by U.S. military personnel disguised as a civilian unit in Laos' capital, Vientiane (Hamilton-Merritt 70). Two major sides were present within Laos. The Pathet Lao, a communist group backed by the North Vietnamese, and the rightist Royal Lao Army. The United States containment policy of the time aimed to stop the spread of communism wherever present. This containment policy was the major reasoning the PEO presence in Laos. Weary of the threat posed by the Pathet Lao, the Program Evaluation

Office was responsible for training and arming large numbers of those in the Royal Lao Army (Hamilton-Merritt 70). The effort put forth by now civilian personnel was largely successful with their goals of training and arming. Despite the momentary victory, certain members trained by the PEO would not stay loyal to the rightists.

The Programs Evaluation Office was established in 1955 and had successfully armed and trained the Royal Lao Army in case of an attack from the communist friendly Pathet Lao. From 1951 Souvanna Phouma was the elected Prime Minister of Laos. We allied with the neutralist party and had obtained his position with a large majority during elections. Towards the end of the 1950's Phouma had started to ally himself more with communism. This fact was largely due to the fact that Phouma's half brother was the front man for the Pathet Lao (Warner 287). Not about to let communism spread, America cast out Phouma from his leadership role in mid-1960 and installed a friendly, anticommunist Prime Minister. Unfortunately for the U.S., the new Prime Minister only lasted a few months. Kong Le, a Laotian trained and armed by the Program Evaluation Office, leads a revolt against Vientiane (Warner 29). His attacks on the capital and victory over the Prime Minister allows Souvanna Phouma to retake his position. Just as quickly as Kong Le and his forces assaulted Vientiane, a Royal Lao force was not prepared to let the capital fall. Backed by William Lair and his Paru officers, the rightists are able to take back Vientiane, ousting Phouma and sending him and his men fleeing. Phouma and Kong Le retreat north to the Pathet Lao occupied Plain of Jars. Shortly after their retreat, Phouma gains support from the Russians, who are more than happy to airdrop supplies and weaponry to the neutralists and Pathet Lao (Hamilton-Merritt 81). Realizing the Royal Lao armies victory would have been for naught without Lair and the Paru, Desmond Fitzgerald asks him to stick around and give support where needed. Fitzgerald was a covert CIA operative in charge of the Far East division.

With a swift change of power three times over in Vientiane, two opposing sides had been solidified in Laos. The Pathet Lao and Laotian neutralists operated in the north with backing from both Russia and North Vietnam. In the south were the Royal Lao Army with Lair's Paru officers and U.S. CIA. Also present during these coup's was Vang Pao. Helping overthrow Kong Le, Pao was promoted within the Royal Lao Army. Such promotions were rare for the Hmong minority. Vang Pao's feared the Vietnamese wanted to take over Laos. Both seeking democracy, Vang Pao would soon be the CIA's best friend. Living within the mountains throughout Laos, the Hmong were unaware of the crucial role they would play in assisting the rightists and CIA against communism.

American presence in Laos was, up until a certain point, very small scale. A handful of CIA controlled and coordinated the Hmong, Royal Lao Army, and Paru. The small scale mindset was utilized especially with the Hmong. Prior to the attacks on Vientiane, Vang Pao was a familiar name, yet not highly important to those in South East Asia. Having dealt with hill tribes in Thailand, Lair knew and appreciated their way of life. The Hmong were a simple people who lived in the mountains of Laos and held strong family ties. They utilized slash and burn farming and knew the landscape well. "While the Hmong in Laos may have seemed 'primitive' to casual observers, those who knew them well knew that these were tough, strong, truthful, committed people whose stories, legends, and textile arts, visually unknown in the West, were not 'primitive' and whose social structure and customs were in many ways sophisticated" (Hamilton-Merritt 1). The CIA and the Hmong both had something to gain by uniting with each other. Each fearing a spread of communism, the Hmong graciously accepted the CIA as its mentor in fighting against North Vietnam. Vang Pao knew his peoples way of life would be put in danger should the Pathet Lao and communism take over. With both parties wanting democracy in Laos, Vang Pao was

more than happy to welcome Bill Lair in a meeting. As Vang Pao stated in his meeting with Lair, "They (the Hmong) want to keep their way of life. They want to fight the communists. They will follow me" (Warner 31). The meeting of two sides symbolized a united force that would remain intact until the end of the war. "What Vang Pao thought about -- all the time -- was war, though politics ran a close second, because fighting the war required political support" (Warner 266). Vang Pao was a warrior at heart, and under the wing of the United States his warrior mentality would be adequately nourished. Seeking guns, artillery and aircraft, his want of superior firepower was often obliged to by the Americans.

William Lair's Paru were utilized in much the same fashion as in Thailand. That is to say, they trained and educated rural communities on defense. While the area of focus had shifted, the main goal was the same. Paru officers trained Hmong villagers with rifles, and eventually artillery, to be used in guerrilla warfare (Warner 127). Now as soldiers, Vang Pao took command over his new army. They did not operate with traditional tactics. Vang Pao's knowledge of Laos and its mountains allowed his men to cause devastating attacks with little to no casualties. Hmong soldiers as well as Lair's Paru were able to deliver an attack and be gone before the North Vietnamese knew what was going on. "The Hmong genius as fighters was their quickness in striking and their superb knowledge of the terrain" (Hamilton-Merritt 176). The Hmong were not afraid of retreat either. If faced with overwhelming odds or a losing battle, the Hmong felt no shame in fleeing in order to fight another day. The Thai Paru worked well with the Hmong and in Laos. Vang Pao and his men learned quickly and showed proficiency using rifles after only a short period of time. The Paru resembled the Hmong and were able to communicate effectively with them. With their ability to blend in and often times appear as Hmong soldiers, the U.S. presence was well concealed. "Politically, all the governments involved--the Americans, the

Thais, and the Royalist Lao on one side; the Pathet Lao, the North Vietnamese, and their backers, the Chinese and Soviets, on the other--reached the same conclusion about the Geneva accords. As much as they would have liked to publicize their enemies' violations of the accords, they had more to gain by keeping their own roles quiet" (Warner 135). Without fear of public acknowledgement, each side contributed to the struggle in Laos. Guerrilla warfare symbolized the early years of conflict within Laos. Despite its effectiveness, South Vietnams importance caused an influx of focused attention on Laos.

Just as with the introduction of more government funding and its change of how the conflict was fought, so too did the increased number of air strikes push the north Vietnamese back. The Hmong had started the war as inhabitants of the Laotian hills, some never having seen the white skin of an American. Quickly they evolved, however, and utilized the weaponry and airpower that grew more and more frequent within the country. "Still, the outfit had given him a free hand, first in Thailand and later in Laos, and to Lair that counted for more than promotions or hallway gossip at headquarters. His budget had risen to about $20 million a year, tiny by the standards of Vietnam, and when Langley suggested that he take more, Lair said no, preferring to stay small and lean" (Warner 181). Small scale only lasted so long, however. Try as he might, Bill Lair could not stop the government from further entering Laos. As their importance grew throughout the conflict, more and more air strikes were utilized. The Hmong were quick to integrate airplanes into their guerilla tactics. Certain air squadrons carried English speaking Hmong in the back seat of the cockpit. Ground crews of several Hmong would relay coordinates of Vietnamese activity to the airborne Hmong, who would then translate to the pilot the correct area to target. This proved to be quite effective. Hmong on the ground were very knowledgeable of the Laotian terrain. While only a hundred words maximum were ever communicated between

pilot and Hmong, coordinates and troop sites were easily communicated and bombed. This success was mainly small scale. While not all facets of bombing were successful, these smaller victories showed what was possible. As the war progressed more and more instances of combat were being upgraded. The combination of lethal air power and larger amounts of funding led to one of the most important installations in Laos during the war.

Though many sites within Laos carried importance, one area in particular played a major role in attacks against the North Vietnamese. Phou Pha Thi was the secret mountain location for an American navigational beacon installation. "It was also known by its landing site number, Lima Site 85" (Warner 206). This installation, set up in 1966, aimed to bring more precision and less collateral damage with aircraft and artillery attacks. Prior to the installation it was not uncommon for bombing runs to yield no results. Some attacks targeting herds of buffalo, confused to be enemy units, or even worse, allied targets. "…another jet had lost its bearing and bombed a friendly village in another valley, killing innocent civilians. The error was easier to make than it might seem" (Warner 163). Instances of friendly villages being hit would damage the morale of both American and Hmong alike. "It also didn't help morale when Lao officers on the ground got their coordinates mixed up and called in T-28 strikes on their own positions" (Warner 227) The lack of technological wizardry up to that point had caused several headaches for those within Laos. With the navigational beacon installed atop Lima Site 85, the mishaps in attacks would dwindle to far smaller numbers, if not to zero. Even through heavy cloud cover, the beacon could guide bombers to the enemy. "The bombs were accurate within areas the size of a football stadium, thanks to the electronics that guided their release from the planes. This was new in the technology of warfare: No nation had developed that kind of all-weather, high altitude bombing capability before" (Warner 224). While the CIA tried to maintain secrecy over the

mountain, as with any amount of success, someone is bound to notice. Located relatively close to the North Vietnamese border, Lima Site 85 was situated roughly 120 miles away from Hanoi. It was not long before North Vietnamese were alerted to the small mountains giant threat. While Hmong soldiers defended the site, leaders of the CIA stationed in Laos knew that it could not withstand a large attack.

Prior to the radar installation on Phou Pha Thi, the conflict within Laos was mostly a small scale engagement, utilizing guerilla warfare as the primary means of attack. Several aspects of the radar installation mark a turning point in the American's secret presence within Laos. As the years progressed since initial operations were set up, the U.S. government was slowly giving more attention to the Kingdom of Laos. With more attention comes more funding, and with more funding came the beginning of the end in Laos. Lair commented on the subject, "This is just what I wanted to avoid - a large American presence. That was the problem in South Vietnam, where the Americans had taken the war away from the South Vietnamese. Now the Americans were taking the war away from the Lao, the Hmong, and the Thai" (Hamilton-Merritt 175). A major reason for the Hmong success was their ability to use guerilla warfare when attacking the Vietnamese. Since the Hmong were never stationed in one place for too long, no counter attack or invasion could be planned by the North Vietnamese. "The North Vietnamese had never committed huge, blockbuster forces in Laos, partly because Vang Pao's guerilla forces had never offered a stationary target and also because, until the radar installation, nothing in Laos had directly threatened the security and the existence of North Vietnam(Warner 232). The radar tower atop Phou Pha Thi not only endangered the North Vietnamese and the Ho Chi Minh trail, but it was also a stationary installation that was in jeopardy of a planned North Vietnamese attack. The NVA were meticulous and routine in their actions. Before an attack, officers would

need to radio in the request and wait for confirmation from Hanoi. This sense of routine was the reason the Hmong were so successful. By the time it could be confirmed to lay siege to an area, the Hmong would have already attacked and retreated to a new area. Bill Lair was well aware of standard procedures within the NVA. One such procedure was the buildup of roads. As the North Vietnamese deemed a target worthy of assault, they would construct roads up to the site to supply and move troops more efficiently. In the case of Lima Site 85, they did not disappoint. "Road construction had begun on January 31, 1968, which was brilliant timing for Hanoi and the worst possible timing for the 7th Air Force" (Warner 231). Just as production began, so too did the Tet Offensive. With the offensive needing the majority of Air Force planes, the road grew closer. The lack of bombing runs ended, however, as the Tet Offensive subsided and American planes returned to Laos. Despite bombing runs and efforts to destroy the roads, they eventually reached the mountain. The North Vietnamese did not skip a step when following protocol, and just as they built their roads, so too did they attack their target.

Aware of the buildup, about 80 Thai soldiers were stationed atop the mountain to help defend. Taking advantage of the very equipment they were defending, those stationed at Pha Thi frequently called in air strikes as they saw fit. "Incredibly, the site's greatest use was aiding its own defense -- a complete perversion of the original goal" (Warner 234). Vietnamese troops eventually permeated the surrounding areas and waited for the opportune moment to strike. Lair knew that over a certain amount of time the site would not hold. Eventually it would need to be abandoned or fortified with more troops. Neither of these scenarios were possible, however. The U.S. government knew how important Lima Site 85 was and could not afford to lose it. "The 7th Air Force and the director told us to 'hold at all cost' -- those words were used -- that it was so important, that it had a tremendous effect on the enemy. They said, 'We're willing to take that

risk because you're saving lives every day.' And so we strapped on our seat belts and said, all right" (Warner 233). Phou Pha Thi gave an extraordinary advantage to pilots, causing massive amounts of damage against communist forces. No matter how bleak the situation looked, the mountain must be held at all costs. "If Lima Site 85 were eliminated, U.S. air power would be seriously crippled" (Hamilton-Merritt 180). Then one night in March of 1968, the fears of Lair, the Hmong and the CIA were realized. With one NVA unit sneaking past Thai defenses, they infiltrated the mountain and began the assault. While those atop the mountain fought against Hmong and Thai defenders, more North Vietnamese surrounded the mountain. "The Hmong did not know of the attack until the NVA commandos ran from the buildings, then the Hmong opened fire" (Hamilton-Merritt 186). As night progressed and morning came, it was determined that the summit was lost. While parts of the mountain were still controlled by Hmong, the decision was to abandon Phou Pha Thi and its components. To many of the players in Laos, Phou Pha Thi was the changing factor in the war. "The fall of Phou Pha Thi was the turning point of the Laos war, according to many of the old hands, including Bill Lair…According to their thinking, the United States, by presenting the North Vietnamese with a fixed target that threatened Hanoi's security, goaded the communists into crushing the Laotians rather than fighting seasonally and distractedly as in previous years" (Warner 246). It symbolized the shift from guerrilla warfare to more conventional western tactics. Its loss signaled the beginning of the end. With millions upon millions of dollars now being poured into Laos, forces were still unable to hold their most important site against a determined and focused enemy.

The same year Lima Site 85 fell, President Richard Nixon was elected into office. His pre-election promises of withdrawing troops from Vietnam would greatly affect the rhyme and rhythm of operations in Laos. At this point over forty thousand North Vietnamese were in Laos,

more than at any other time (Warner 247). The fall of Pha Thi opened the floodgates to NVA troops. Taking advantage of U.S. airpower, the Hmong fought harder than ever before. With Nixon's inauguration in 1969, American citizens were adamant with their disapproval for the war. He promised troop withdrawals and pushed hard for his policy of Vietnamization. Under this policy, South Vietnam would be supplied and armed with modern weapons. Well equipped, they would theoretically be able to defend themselves while American troops pulled out of Vietnam. "Vietnamization was in fact, the U.S. governments fig-leaf means of extricating itself from South Vietnam" (Parker 208). As the Hmong battled back and forth with communist forces, control of the Ho Chi Minh trail would be the deciding factor on how events played out with the Vietnamese. With Nixon only being in office for just over a year, two battalions of North Vietnamese were now stationed in Northern Laos (Hamilton-Merritt 230). The Hmong battled fiercely for the Plain of Jars. As of 1969, the PDJ belonged to rightist forces. Over the next few years however, partial areas would be lost. Inevitably, the entire Plain of Jars would be overrun with communist forces, resulting in evacuations of those stationed within the PDJ. With increased troop presence from the NVA, Hmong soldiers were not as abundant as once before. The shift of tactics, combined with years of fighting had dwindled the Hmong's numbers. "There were a quarter million Hmong, fully mobilized, with grandfathers and twelve-year-olds in the ranks. You just couldn't get more X, more tribesmen" (Warner 249). Large NVA forces and dwindling numbers of Hmong caused a chain reactions of locations being captured by North Vietnam. Both the CIA and the Hmong knew they were fighting a losing war. "As the beaten, demoralized remnants of Vang Pao's force withdrew in early 1969, the North Vietnamese drove south right on their heels" (Warner 271). Vang Pao and his advisers knew it was only a matter of time before they took Long Cheng. Long Cheng was the secret base of operations and home for

Vang Pao and roughly 10,000 other Hmong. Besides being a key location for the Hmong, it was also used by the CIA as a forward staging area for military use. Long Cheng had remained in Hmong control throughout the entire war. It symbolized Vang Pao and his peoples role in the war. Despite any previous skirmishes, Long Cheng could always be counted on for safety. In late 1971 that safety would be put to the test. With a combination of stealth attacks and North Vietnamese clever planning, they had managed to empty the city from forty thousand to about five thousand in just a few days. (Warner 327). Those that remained were Hmong and Thai soldiers, ready to defend the city. With no installation atop Phou Pha Thi to aid in the fighting, pilots were dependent upon good weather and lacked the precision they previously held. Fighting started in December and continued into January of 1972. Vang Pao did what he could to defend Long Cheng. Try as he might, his efforts would not be rewarded this time around. Over the next few months what little equipment was left was airlifted out, with small numbers of Hmong still hiding in the area.

On January 27, 1972, a cease fire was signed by all parties involved in South East Asia. (Warner 340). The agreement of these meetings would call for Laos' neutrality, just as it had been declared with the Geneva Accords. American troops pulled out while the North Vietnamese, just as before, only pretended to withdraw. Communism and NVA forces now controlled most of Laos. On July 1, 1973, most of the CIA paramilitary advisers left Laos. (Warner 353). Throughout that year it was only a matter of time before all Hmong and rightist friendly troops left the country. Neutralists had entered Vientiane to help with the neutralization process of the city. "Pathet Lao military forces, host to our North Vietnamese enemy for so many years, were garrisoned in the capital" (Parker 213). Those who were disguised as civilians were pulled out of Laos, just as Air America was in mid-1974. Laos had returned to the calm

mountainous country it was. While fighting still occurred within the country, it was not as harsh as the previous decade. Communism was the rule and the Hmong were on the run. Some still hid within the mountains. A majority of Hmong, however, fled to Thailand. Here they resided in refugee camps. "Once in Thailand, General Vang Pao learned that this move was not a temporary relocation but the beginning of permanent exile" (Hamilton-Merritt 351). The Americans had pulled out of Laos and left the Hmong behind. Despite no formal agreement between the Hmong and the U.S., there are still lasting affects between the two peoples that can be seen to this day. While initially only evacuating a handful of Hmong to America, it was a short matter of time before hundreds of thousands of Hmong made their way across the Pacific to the States. After fighting against communism for over a decade, the Hmong had a new battle to fight, the fight for integration and acceptance in a new country.

Currently, the Hmong have achieved a strong sense of integration into day to day life in America. Their integration, however, did not come immediately or without hardship. Since the CIA was technically not present in Laos, the United States offered little help to the Hmong when America pulled out of South East Asia. With communism taking hold of Laos, the Pathet Lao aimed to destroy the Hmong who had fought against them for the past decade (Hamilton-Merritt 340). Since Thailand did not want to accommodate a large Hmong refugee population, the United States started to resettle small amounts of Hmong in the United States. Minnesota and Wisconsin were two such destinations chosen by the government for Hmong populations. While the numbers started in the hundreds, it soon grew to thousands of Hmong coming to America. “In 1975, the U.S. was willing to admit fewer than 300 Hmong…but both the quotas and the eligibility requirements were liberalized over the years, with about 25,000 Hmong admitted in 1980 alone” (Fadiman 167). Since they fought for over a decade allied with the CIA against

communism, most Hmong thought they would be praised and welcomed when arriving in America. With the events that took place in Laos being mostly unknown to American citizens; praise was the last thing the Hmong received. “There were more news stories about South Vietnam in the papers every day than about the Laos war, even in Laos' capital, Vientiane. Nobody knew what was going on because it was supposed to be a secret war” (Warner 221). Often times confused with the Vietnamese, numerous people held ill thoughts to their presence in the United States.

The Hmong currently reside in only a handful of states. The majority can be found in concentrated populations in cities such as Fresno, California, as well as St. Paul, Minnesota. Wisconsin holds the third largest number of Hmong in America; however their population patterns are more dispersed than in California or Minnesota. A major population of Hmong in California can be found in Fresno (Vang). Originally the draw of Fresno came from word of mouth throughout Hmong circles. They had heard of the nice California weather as well as the large amounts of farmland in the area. With large amounts of farmland, it was assumed they could transfer their farming knowledge to a new country, providing an easy means of growing food. When they arrived, however, they found that the land was privately owned. This situation was quite different from the government owned lands the Hmong farmed in Laos. The privately owned land was harder to obtain, leaving the Hmong without a proper means to support themselves. This was especially true for the Hmong who came to America with little to no English speaking skills. On top of having little to no land to farm, jobs in general were hard to come by. “Every Hmong can tell stories about colonels who became janitors, military communication specialists who became chicken processors, flight crewmen who found no work at all” (Fadiman 206). The Hmong possessed very little skills applicable in the States. As

subsistence farmers escaping death and persecution in Laos, all the Hmong wanted was an area where they could work hard and support themselves.

Culturally the Hmong failed to integrate early on. This was not due to a lack of trying, rather it was the combination of taboo cultural practices and not knowing what was and wasn't socially acceptable in America. The Hmong practice animism with the belief that all natural objects contain spirits. They frequently participate in animal sacrifices and integrate the use of shamans in spiritual ceremonies. As can be expected, there was a clash of values when the Hmong originally came to America (Reiter). In places like Merced, California, there were often reports and complaints of Hmong sacrificing chickens and goats in their backyards or even in the parking lot of apartment complexes. While practices such as these were common in Laos, whether it be before a battle or for the sake of a special occasion, they did not translate well to American culture.

The Hmong as a whole are a strong, family oriented people. This fact explains the reason for highly centralized populations within the United States. As with many immigrant populations, those just entering a new country tend to drift to areas of their local population. Examples of this can be seen in most large cities, with areas like China Town and Little Italy. This fact is no different for the Hmong. Their strong family ties have actually accelerated the grouping effect. As more Hmong come to America they are seeking out concentrated populations such as those present in Fresno and St. Paul.

Currently there are over 200,000 Hmong living in the United States. Not all Hmong within the States are well established. Those who have risen to prominence have started programs that are in place to help assimilate those who are looking for help. The Hmong

American Partnership, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, is one such program. It offers ESL services for children, work-focused programs to help families move from public assistance to self-sufficiency, as well as a myriad of other beneficial services for people of Hmong origin (HMP). Those who have succeeded have strong ties to their fellow Hmong. Some have even risen through the ranks within the political system. In Minnesota, Cy Thao holds a seat in the House of Representatives while Mee Moua resides in the Minnesota Senate. Both are Hmong and were born in Laos. Mee Moua has even talked of running for governor (Swanson). In just over 30 years the Hmong went from immigrating to an unfamiliar country, to having more than one representative within the political spectrum. As the hill tribe people of Laos succeed and contribute to American society, those with significantly less are still able to contribute culturally to the areas they populate, despite the tremendous hardships originally faced.

In the book, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, a Hmong family living in Merced, is followed and documented as they struggle with California hospitals to treat their epileptic child. Dilemma's concerning two different medical views were faced by doctors when dealing with Hmong patients. The Hmong believe that epilepsy is a trait inherent in shamans, an integral part of their cultural and spiritual ancestry (Fadiman 20). As such, both the family and doctors clashed when it came to treatment methods for the daughter's epilepsy. Ultimately, the hardships and frustrations witnessed throughout the book ended with the hospital employing greater cross-cultural programs to help deal with future issues. The book is a perfect example of both the positive and negative aspects the Hmong have created since their time in America. On one hand, thousands and thousands of dollars in hospital resources were exhausted when trying to deal with the Hmong. The lack of communication resulted in either over medication or even cases of under medicating the epileptic child (Fadiman 85). However, these negative aspects

when dealing with one Hmong family has ultimately helped shape future instances of cross cultural doctor visits. Merced hospitals now staff Hmong speaking translators. Often times the only means of translation between doctors and the parents were the Hmong children, who were more fluent in English than their parents. Complications still arose, however, as some English words had no translation in Hmong. This complication could lead to improper doses being given to children by their parents. These translators help educate Hmong families on how American hospitals work, and also help them understand how American medicine can be combined with animistic practices. This combination of medical views help the Hmong retain their cultural roots, as well as keeping them safe from diseases they may not fully understand.

Another cultural aspect affecting the Hmong is gang activity. Many Hmong families are still burdened with a low socioeconomic status since immigrating over. With the younger generation knowing little of their homeland and with parents trying to earn money, gangs have become quite prevalent (Reiter). Gang life appears to offer a luxurious lifestyle to Hmong youth. While many families survive on welfare or small salaries, gang life provides younger Hmong a sense of belonging. This trend was the focus in the movie Gran Torino. It portrayed the pressures teenage Hmong face to join gangs. The movie also touched upon the Hmong culture. Clint Eastwood stars as a Vietnam veteran who starts the movie lumping the Hmong into the same category as the Vietnamese he fought against. As the movie progresses and as Eastwood learns about the Hmong culture, he helps his teenage neighbor against the neighborhood gangs. Just as it is showcased within the movie, Hmong gangs are creating problems of violence and destruction in cities with large populations of Hmong.

Just recently the Hmong have made headlines. In 2007 nine Hmong were charged with trying to help overthrow the Laotian government (BBC News). Individuals supposedly tried to smuggle arms over the Thai border into Laos. These individuals were all citizens of the United States. Among those accused were General Vang Pao. Spending over a decade side by side with the CIA, he still dreams of a communist free Laos. In 2009 all charges in the case were dropped. Much of the older generation Hmong still hold on to the idea of a free and democratic Laos. More than thirty years after their departure, some still hold onto the fight against communism. The incident had a dividing effect, however, between older and younger Hmong. "A younger generation of Hmong-Americans… said they respected the man (Vang Pao) but did not wish to return to a homeland they had never seen and worried that the charges might stain the Hmong community" (Davey). Although older generations still have the war in Laos fresh in their minds; newer generations, never having seen Laos, want to maintain a strong image of the Hmong community. This image can be achieved by continuing to integrate and succeed in the United States. Most of all, it can be achieved by letting go of the events in Laos during the 1960's and 70's.

The Hmong are the beginning and end of America's secret war in Laos. They lent themselves to the CIA as strong allies in the fight against communism. Through the coup of Vientiane to the defense of Phou Pha Thi and Long Cheng, Vang Pao and the Hmong pledged undying loyalty. This loyalty remained, even in the face of American withdrawal. Even though it appears Vang Pao may never see a free and democratic Laos, he still has his life, and the lives of many Hmong who fought next to him against communism. The CIA's involvement in South East Asia, while causing enormous amounts of damage to the enemy, ultimately succumbed to the North Vietnamese and communist forces. While the war is taught in schools throughout the

country, Laos is never a subject of focus. For over a decade the CIA worked with Hmong soldiers to fight against the North Vietnamese and stop advances of the Ho Chi Minh trail. Yet few Americans could pinpoint the country on a map. To the average American the intricacies of Laos will never be realized. Its struggles, its people, and its outcome will continue to remain a secret.

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