

## **Genesis of the Hmong-American Alliance, 1949-1962: Aspirations, Expectations and Commitments during an Era of Uncertainty**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Following an overview of the Franco-Hmong relationship that developed during the first half of the twentieth century and laid the groundwork for future alignments, the main body of this paper focuses on the formative years of the multi-faceted Hmong-American alliance that evolved between 1949 and 1962. Chronologically summarized, this period encompasses wide-ranging and often tumultuous events that ultimately put Laos in what has been described as the cockpit of the Cold War and placed the Hmong on the front lines. When the colonial French withdrew from Laos following the First Indochina War, the United States stepped in to fill the vacuum left behind in the politically unstable country, Washington's objective being to neutralize Laos and block Communist infiltration from North Vietnam through northeastern Laos—the homeland of the Hmong—and into the Mekong valley, the heartland of the politically dominant Lao, and neighboring Thailand. Trapped in the middle were the Hmong, a multi-clan ethnic minority originally from China that was held in contempt by the governing Lao. The Hmong resettled mainly in Xieng Khouang, a province bordering Tonkin in Vietnam, a country whose hegemony the Hmong historically resisted. The pro-West paramount leaders of the Hmong, Touby Lyfoung and his successor Vang Pao, served as mediators between clan leaders and were mindful of the expectations of their people and their aspiration for freedom. Recognizing that the threat posed by the Vietnamese placed their homeland and livelihoods in jeopardy, they negotiated the support of powerful foreign patrons—the French and later the Americans—and served as intermediaries between the Hmong clan leaders, their foreign patrons, and successive Lao governments. As the showdown leading to the so-called “Secret War” edged forward, the political agendas of the key players were frequently readjusted in the volatile environment. This paper describes the resulting uncertainties that emerged as mutual commitments were made, the outcomes of which often took unexpected turns. As time passed, the Hmong became the principal instrument of a continued Royal Lao Government presence in northeastern Laos.

**Keywords:** Laos, Hmong, Secret War, Indochina War

## Introduction

Hmong history has been a “long skein of rebellion, defeat, migration, and flight” (Scott 2009: 69). Following the demise of the mythical Hmong kingdom in China and years of persecution by the Han Chinese, the movement of Hmong south from China to the eastern reaches of the Southeast Asian Massif (Culas 2004: 61) accelerated during the second half of the nineteenth century. The majority of the Hmong who entered Laos<sup>1</sup> spilled over the borderlands from Tonkin in Vietnam and settled in the rugged terrain of Xieng Khouang, a largely unpopulated<sup>2</sup> mountainous upland territory—about the size of Connecticut—in northeastern Laos that was well-suited for swidden agriculture and growing and selling opium, a mainstay of the Hmong economy (Culas 2004: 71). Furthermore, Laos was the home of new ethnic groups and new power structures with which the Hmong had to cope; namely, the Lao and the French (Smalley 1986: 7).

Xieng Khouang was a Tai Phuan principality<sup>3</sup> with a large, grassy central plain about 65 kilometers across (known as the Plain of Jars), strategically positioned in northeastern Laos, which was “decimated in the nineteenth century by war and regional contest”<sup>4</sup> (Evans 2009: 255) between rivals Siam and Annam compounded by Chinese Haw<sup>5</sup> raids. During this same period the French were engaged in mapping the borders of Laos while creating their Indochinese Empire, and the Franco-Siamese Treaty of October 3, 1893 marked the definitive establishment of the French Protectorate in Laos (Gunn 2003: 20-21; Gunn 1988: 28; Simms 1999: 210). Although 1899 brought a real end to the Xieng Khouang principality, members of the ruling family continued to play a symbolic role in the French Colonial Administration (Simms 1999: 202-203; Dommen 2001: 23).

Nong Het, a mountainous multi-ethnic communications crossroads (Smalley 1990: 87) located 17 kilometers from the Vietnam border (Ireson 1995: 205), was one of the earliest areas where Hmong settled in Laos and became their political center.<sup>6</sup> In 1920 it was estimated that 30,000 Hmong lived in the Keng Khoai area near Nong Het (Roux 1954: 388). Khmu and Tai ethnic groups also resided in the region, spilling over into Vietnam, with the Tai living in the valleys, the Khmu on the mountainsides, and the Hmong on the mountaintops.

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<sup>1</sup> As described by Bernard Fall, “Laos is neither a geographical nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience... wherein [the country’s] physical chaos alone accounts for much of Laos’ present trouble” (Fall 1969: 23).

<sup>2</sup> Xieng Khouang’s population density was estimated to be 4.4 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in 1943 and 6.7 in 1958 (Halpern, Laos Paper 3: 4).

<sup>3</sup> A brief history of Xieng Khouang can be found in Simms 1999: 184-203. See also Lee 2015: 80-88.

<sup>4</sup> By about 1900 two generations of warfare probably reduced the Phuan population of the plateau by more than three-quarters (Smuckarn and Breazeale 1988: 3).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the Chinese Haw (also referred to as Ho) raids see Smuckarn and Breazeale 1988.

<sup>6</sup> See Nong Het area map in Lee 2015 page 154.

While the historical relationships between the Hmong and the Tai Phuan leadership of Xieng Khouang are largely unknown, it seems that an alliance or working agreement had been worked out between them whereby Hmong clan leaders—the most prominent of whom settled in Nong Het—were provided administrative rights to those who formed compact communities (Barney 1966: 274; Gunn 2003: 214; Yang Dao 1975: 25).

### **Paramount Hmong Leadership**

Being a stateless political and kinship-based social organization divided into clans,<sup>7</sup> the Hmong were not a politically or culturally unified group (Barney 1967: 273-274). During the early 1900s, a combination of heavy (mostly opium) taxes imposed by colonial administrators (Brocheux and Hemery 2011: 285) and clan rivalry for political and economic power (Vang 2010: 21) led to a series of Hmong uprisings and messianic rebellions, including the Pa Chay rebellion, 1918-1921.<sup>8</sup> While there were probably several causes of the Pa Chay rebellion—it is widely believed that Pa Chay projected the messianic image of a divine prophet in a quest for the Mandate of Heaven (see Lee 2015: 121) to restore the mythical Hmong kingdom—it prompted the colonial government to make sweeping changes in the administration of the Hmong populations.

One colonial observer pointed out that “we have been twenty-five years in the [Hmong] country and we don’t know a word of their language, we are unable to have interpreters, nor [Hmong] schools, military (conscripts) or administrators... No study of the [Hmong] exists... The [Hmong] say, ‘we do not see you’” (Gunn 2003: 223).

Accordingly, the French commissioned Hmong specialist Father F.M. Savina who, in 1920, set forth guiding principles for a more equitable Hmong administration which proclaimed that the Hmong should not be subordinate to any other races in the administrative hierarchy and would be entitled to administer themselves, albeit “under the surveillance of the government of the [French] Protectorate.” To this end, a census was to be taken of the Hmong by tribe and habitat, and a new territorial delineation of the cantons and communes was to be drawn up. The Hmong were to be invited to elect their own tribal chiefs, one each per province, one per canton, and one per commune. Furthermore, Hmong chiefs would be authorized to adjudicate intra-Hmong disputes and pay taxes directly to the French (Savina 1972: 238-239; Gunn 2003: 225).

The French sought to improve relationships with the Hmong by selecting and appointing an inter-clan, or paramount leader of the Hmong who could, under French patronage, mediate between the government, on the one hand, and individual clan leaders on the other (Lee 2005: 30; Saykao: Internet; Smalley 1990: 14).

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<sup>7</sup> One source identifies 19 clans in Laos: Chang, Cheng, Chu, Fang, Hang, Her, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lor or Lo, Ly or Lee, Moua, Phang, Tang, Thao, Vue, Xiong, Vang, and Yang (Yang Dao 1992: 23).

<sup>8</sup> For detailed accounts of the causes and impact of the Pa Chay rebellion see Gunn 2003: 215-215; Quincy 2000: 31-49; Lee 2015: 103-120.

During the long period of transition leading up to, and including World War II and, subsequently, the two Indochina wars, there were at least four Hmong leaders, each from Nong Het, who reached the paramount leadership level: Kaitong Lo Blia Yao<sup>9</sup> (who had collaborated with the French for some time) and his son Faydang Lobliayao, followed by French-educated Touby Lyfoung, and American-supported Vang Pao. These leaders brought many clans together through their personal leadership skills, inter-clan marriages, and patronage-support from their mostly foreign patrons (Saykao: Internet), and served as political brokers by mediating between the demands of the divided social and leadership structures and outside benefactors (Lee 2005: 6-7). Indeed, it has been suggested that these key leaders were destined to harvest wheat sewn by Pa Chay that was viewed as “symbols of rebirth and perpetual hope” (Quincy 2000: 44).

A rift developed between the Lo and Ly clans when the French selected Francophile Touby as Kaitong Lo Blia Yao’s successor at the expense of Lo Blia’s son, Faydang, who argued that he was entitled to his father’s position. Consequently:

internal division crystallized rapidly between the two clans, and also divided those who were allied to them through kinship, economic, or ritual ties. This division came to influence the future of practically all of the Hmong in Laos. They would, directly or not, be obliged to take sides in the military conflict between the French and the Japanese, and also later between the Americans and the Communists” (Michaud and Culas 2000: 109).

As William Smalley pointed out, “Touby Lyfoung and Faydang Lobliayao [as well as Vang Pao] epitomize the many-layered but fluctuating divisions among the Hmong, although division is certainly not restricted to their family rivalry. At the same time, [all three] illustrate that large groups of Hmong people can unite, up to a point, under the right leader in times of sufficient need” (Smalley 1990: 14-15).

The competition and divisions which emerged within Hmong society’s conflicting Hmong leaders evolved, over time, and drew the resentment of sectors of Hmong society and ultimately led to further messianic rebellions in the early 1970s (e.g. the Shong Lue Yang movement described in Smalley’s *Mother of Writing*) within segments of the population, events that will not be covered in this paper (Lee 2015: 14). Suffice it to say, however, that the Hmong recognized two kinds of leaders: “the messianic or prophet leader who claims to be the Hmong king incarnate; and the secular political broker who is legitimated by the state, the foreign lords who rule over the Hmong” (Lee 2015: 25). This paper focuses on the secular leader.

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<sup>9</sup> Kaitong was the official title bestowed by the Phuan upon the heads of the great Hmong families in the Nong Het area; namely, the Lo, Ly, Yang, Vang, and Moua clans. The Kaitongs were obliged to pay tribute to the Phuan authorities (Yang Dao 1993: 25).

## World War II

Regardless of whose side they were on, the Hmong “are known for their exceptional honesty. If a promise is given it will always be fulfilled—even if years later.” Furthermore, they “are excellent allies in wartime, first, because of their steadfast, unswerving character. Once a thing is decided, it is for a long time. Second, because they occupy the strategic mountaintops. Third, because they are excellent marksmen and natural hunters. Fourth, because they make their own highly accurate flint-lock guns, their own black powder and balls” (Burchett 1959: 214-215).

During World War II, Francophile Touby Lyfoung sheltered and guided Free French commandos after the Japanese reneged on their agreements with the French Vichy government in March 1945. It was crucial for the French to maintain a foothold in the Nong Het region which commanded Colonial Route 7<sup>10</sup> from Vinh in Vietnam to Xieng Khouang (Gunn 1988: 164-165). Not only did the French seek to secure strategic territory, they also wanted to command the opium trade (McCoy 1970: 98).

In opposition to Touby during World War II, Faydang<sup>11</sup> mobilized men to support the Japanese and join the Viet Minh<sup>12</sup> to attack Touby’s pro-French partisans (Lee 1982: 201). His military commander was Faydang’s cousin, Thao Tou Yang (also known as Saychou Tou Thao),<sup>13</sup> who formed Faydang’s first company of Hmong soldiers, the Pa Chay Company (Lee 2015: 296). Langer and Zasloff have noted that at the time Faydang commanded loyalty of only a minor segment of the Hmong population, and that his alliance with the Communists was most probably a reflection of the clan feud rather than ideological convictions (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 47).<sup>14</sup> In any event, it was observed that the respective alignments of the two rivals were destined to be oriented toward the opposition party, thereby assuring perpetual competition (Barney 1967: 275).

When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, Lao nationalists formed a movement known as Lao Issara<sup>15</sup> to block the return of Laos to French jurisdiction. With support from

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<sup>10</sup> “In the 1920s a French road-building project, linking Luang Prabang and Vinh, Vietnam, to be called Colonial Route 7, went directly through Xieng Khouang province. This contact with the French, who hired many of the Hmong as laborers, was an important step toward ending Hmong isolation” (Castle 1979: 130).

<sup>11</sup> A biographical sketch of Faydang can be found in Burchett 1959: 228-233.

<sup>12</sup> The League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, was set up by the Indochinese Communist Party in May 1941 to serve as a broad front organization for Communist-directed independence and reform movement in Vietnam (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 164).

<sup>13</sup> For more information about elements of the Thao clan see Quincy 2000: 250-251.

<sup>14</sup> Faydang claimed 40,000 followers (Burchett 1959: 233]; the Lao Ministry of Interior recorded a total of 37,347 Hmong in Xieng Khouang in 1953. The latter was a sample population figure (out of a recorded figure of 86,728 people) who resided in 940 villages (Halpern 1961: 20).

<sup>15</sup> The Lao Issara seized power following the Japanese surrender in August 1945. By April 1946, members of the movement, which opposed the return of Laos to French jurisdiction, were forced to flee to Thailand with the French reoccupation of Laos. Early in 1949, the Lao Issara split over the question of relations with the Viet Minh. Negotiations with the French authorities led to abolition of the Lao Issara government-in-exile in October 1949 and

Touby Lyfoung's Hmong, by January 1946 the Franco-Laotian guerrillas were able to displace the Issara from the main towns in Xieng Khouang, as well as the royal capital, Luang Prabang, in April (Dommen 2001: 142-144; Dommen 1971: 295; Lyfoung 1996: 132-134). It was stated that "the Franco-Laotians were heavily dependent in this region on the support they received from the [Hmong], who were better able to operate in the mountains than in the towns" (Dommen 2001: 142). By the end of April 1946 the French regained control of Laos while the great majority of the Issara and their Vietnamese allies crossed the Mekong and took refuge in Thailand (Thompson 1955: 202).

### **Chao Muang of Muang Meo**

In recognition of Touby Lyfoung's support during World War II and the desire of the Hmong people to achieve emancipation from the constraints of political and administrative organization by having an authority of their own ethnicity appointed to a high political rank, upon recommendation by the French (Gunn 1988: 227) King Sisavang Vong rewarded Touby in September 1946 by appointing him "Chao Muang<sup>16</sup> of the Hmong Population" in Xieng Khouang Province (Yang Dao 1993: 29). For the first time, all of the Hmong population, estimated to be 40 percent of Xieng Khouang's total population (Halpern Lao Paper 3: 18)—about 75,000 Hmong out of a total population of 165,000 (Lyfoung 1996: 141)—came under the administrative management of a single Hmong leader, thereby providing them with a sense of autonomy (Lee 2005: 323).

The French recognized that a leader with the rank of Chao Muang was still not empowered to deal directly with the monarchy since this could be achieved only in the traditional circuitous way through the medium of the Chao Khoueng. However, the French also recognized that it was impossible to create an ethnic Hmong Chao Khoueng. While endorsing Touby as their indisputable Hmong chief, the French counted on him to refuse nomination for the Chao Khoueng position. Ultimately, Chao Saykham,<sup>17</sup> an ethnic Tai Phuan, was confirmed Chao Khoueng of Xieng Khouang Province and Touby as Chao Muang (Gunn 1988: 227). Touby viewed his position as being "Assistant Governor of the province of Xieng Khouang and chief Administrator or Chao Muang of the Hmong population"<sup>18</sup> (Lyfoung, 1996: 141; see Lee 2015: 279-281).

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the return of most members to Laos. Those remaining formed the communist Pathet Lao and continued the armed struggle in alliance with the Viet Minh (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 73-74).

<sup>16</sup>A "Muang" is an administrative district, and the "Chao Muang" is a member of the civil service appointed by the governor. A "Tasseng" is a sub-district that was introduced by the French (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 89, 152).

<sup>17</sup> An autobiographical sketch of Chao Saykham with references to his relationship with Touby can be found in Evans 2009: 256-265.

<sup>18</sup> Touby's younger brother, Colonel Nao Kao, maintains that as Chao Muang of the Hmong the king extended to Touby authority over all Hmong in the land of the Lao (including Sam Neua, Luang Prabang and Sayaboury Provinces) (Lee 2015: 279).

Not only was Chao Saykham, Touby's close personal friend and former classmate with whom he did not want to enter into a feud, Mai Na Lee argues that his decision not to accept the Chao Khoueng position may have taken into consideration "the heavy price of autonomy by assessing the political circumstances of the time. The French and the king were offering Xieng Khouang to him only because of the impending struggle for Laos. Accepting their offer would have meant committing the Hmong to a bloody struggle against Viet Minh incursions from the east" (Lee 2015: 280).

In 1947, a Constitution was worked out by the first National Assembly and promulgated by the king on May 11, 1946 (Dommen 1971: 32). Notably, the Constitution granted citizenship to Hmong and other ethnic minorities, and Touby stated that:

at last, for the first time in the Hmong collective memories, the Hmong people really 'had' a country like other people in the world. The wandering life without any specific tie of the Hmong people seemed to come to an end, in Laos... The first step towards making the Hmong people be part of the Laotian nation had been achieved, but there was still a long way to go to complete the process (Lyfoung 1996:143-144).

Not only did Touby obtain political autonomy and, technically, citizenship for the Hmong while proclaiming to be loyal to the king, he balanced Hmong aspiration for sovereignty against Lao concern for their own political hegemony. Mai Na Lee stated that these diplomatic capabilities distinguished Touby as the "great Hmong diplomat of the twentieth century" (Lee 2005: 263).

Touby served as the "connecting link" between the Laotian government—namely, the governor of Xieng Khouang Province, Chao Saykham—and the Hmong's political system (Barney 1957: 14). His support network was enhanced by an increased number of Hmong tassengs (sub-districts)—from 17 to 24—under his supervision (Yang Dao 1993: 27). To strengthen Touby's stature, the French effectively gave him free hand to distribute bounties of leadership titles to his subjects (Lee 2005: 355-356).

Mai Na Lee has pointed out that what made Touby popular "was that he shared the Hmong's aspiration to be 'free'—to live as equals with the Lao. Touby was not merely an instrumental political broker; he was an active manipulator of the system. He served the French while also furthering Hmong desires to remain autonomous" (Lee 2005: 263-264).

It should be noted, however, that Muang Hmong (known at the time as Muang Meo) was not an autonomous, geographically-defined district; rather, it technically included all Hmong people who were widely scattered throughout the province in small villages—usually consisting of ten or twenty houses—that were connected by networks of footpaths and horse tracks (Yang Dao 1974: 8). Being stateless nomadic people, it did not appear as though they sought the

emancipation of the wide-ranging territory in which they lived. Rather, they simply wished to “escape from the constraints of political and administrative organization” (Gunn 1988: 227).

Mai Na Lee observed that “Hmong did not seem to connect land ownership with political power. Touby may not have awakened fully to the idea of land entitlement [and did not consider Muang Hmong] as an autonomous Hmong zone. Touby's lack of consciousness is not surprising given that the concept of geographical borders is a fairly recent phenomenon even in the lowlands of Southeast Asia” (Lee 2005: 325). Indeed, before the borders were mapped out by the French during the latter part of the nineteenth century, what is known as Laos today was composed of multiple small kingdoms with overlapping frontiers that paid tribute to powerful Vietnamese and Siamese (see Winichakul 1997 and Ivarsson 2008).

Even though the French and Lao King Sisavang Vong recognized the importance of drawing major Hmong leaders to their side in anticipation of the forthcoming struggle to regain control over Laos (Lee 2005: 355-356), shortly thereafter in 1947 Crown Prince Savang Vatthana informed Touby that he would like the Hmong to return their guns. Accordingly, Touby collected and returned four thousand guns and “told [his] men to go back home to work hard again in their rice fields as they used to do before the war” (Touby 1996: 135). At the same time he “left to each chief of village and Hmong Tasseng a gun as a souvenir of the war time” (Touby 1996: 135).

Perhaps Prince Savang’s order reflected historic concerns by the Lao that the Hmong might seek to spark an uprising that would lead to secession. The Prince “admitted discontent fierce [Hmong] hill tribes northeast Laos and increasing Viet Minh propaganda among them but said he had called all [Hmong] chiefs to Luang Prabang [in] early February and after prolonged talks felt confident [of] their loyalty. (Missionary sources say [the] root difficulty [is the] price [of] opium [the] chief money crop of [the Hmong])” (FRUS 1950, February 3, 1950: Document 109).

Touby’s stated goal was not to spark an uprising but to “make the Hmong people to be part of the Laotian nation” (Lyfoung 1996: 144). To this end, at the same time when Touby was appointed Chao Muang his brothers Toulia Lyfoung and Tougeu Lyfoung were elected to the first Laotian Constitutional National Assembly, and appointed to the King’s Council by the King of Laos, respectively. The Hmong had emerged (nominally, at least) as a significant national constituency in the kingdom of Laos (Yang Dao 2004: 479).

### **First Indochina War and the Pathet Lao**

In 1945, the Viet Minh launched a war of independence against French colonialists. In view of the existential threat placed on both Vietnam and Laos by the advancing Viet Minh, in early 1950 French intelligence launched a paramilitary program known as Groupe de Commandos Mixtes Aeroportes (GCMA) which organized many tribal units to operate in both Laos and North Vietnam (Blaufarb 1977: 138; Conboy 1995: 6). In November 1952, the French



reestablished contact with Touby, who agreed to call upon his clan leaders to recruit Hmong into a GCMA militia network (known as “maquis,” or rural guerrilla bands) on the condition that they would be used only in their home areas (Conboy 1995: 6-7). Six Hmong bases (Phou Dou, Tha Lin Noi, San Tiau, Muang Hiem, Muang Ngan, and Pha Pong) were established to the north, east and south of the Plain of Jars, with 100-man commando units positioned at each base (Muelle 1992: 59). The base commander at one of the key outposts, Nong Het, was Lieutenant Vang Pao (Muelle 1992: 59-61; Conboy 1995: 7). The primary functions of the Hmong maquis were to provide intelligence and guerrilla support.

In the meantime, in early 1949, the Lao Issara movement split<sup>19</sup> over the question of relations with the Viet Minh (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 73), and based on the Viet Minh model Prince Souphanouvong<sup>20</sup> formed the Free Lao Front—by drawing together anti-French forces, including Faydang and his Hmong Resistance League formed in 1946 (Dommen 1971: 75)—which later became known as the Pathet Lao (PL)—to carry on the anti-French resistance (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 46, 143).

According to Wilfred Burchett, “Faydang created the Lao Xung [Highland Lao, or Hmong] Resistance League which included virtually every Lao Xung village in the whole of Xieng Khouang Province. They created such strong inter-villages and set up such formidable defenses that the French and their agents—including tax collectors—scarcely dared set foot in the Lao Xung areas” (Burchett 1959: 230). Faydang would remain leader of the Hmong who sided with the communist Pathet Lao until his death in 1986.

In August 1950 “a congress was held [in Vietnam], attended by delegates from all the nationalities and all sections of the population [wherein] Faydang had been chosen by the Lao Xung people as their delegate... It was unanimously agreed to create the Neo Lao Issara, or [Free Lao Front], and to set up a new Government of National Resistance” (Burchett 1959: 232; Langer and Zasloff 1970: 49-50). During the course of the congress, Faydang was appointed Minister without Portfolio in Souphanouvong’s Resistance Government. Burchett quoted Faydang who said “it [would not be] long before the [Hmong] people could see the benefits of our alliance with the Lao Lum [Lowland Lao] and others” (Burchett 1959: 232-233; see Fall 1969: 43-44).

The Franco-Viet Minh war spilled over into Laos in the spring of 1953 (Pholsena 2010: 348) and the North Vietnamese, with marginal Pathet Lao assistance, staged a two-pronged attack to overrun virtually all of northern Laos (Dommen 2001: 208). While the French, with Hmong assistance, thwarted the attack on Xieng Khouang’s Plain of Jars, the US played a key

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<sup>19</sup> The Lao Issara Government was dissolved following the signing of the Franco-Lao Convention that recognized Laos as an independent state (although the French retained control of various functions, including defense). After signing a mutual-defense treaty in October 22, 1953, Laos was recognized by the French as a “fully independent and sovereign” state (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 74, 44).

<sup>20</sup> For a biographical sketch of Prince Souphanouvong please refer to Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 142.

logistical role by dispatching six C-119 cargo planes with civilian crews to airlift French and Lao troops and armaments to the besieged outposts on the Plain (Fall 1969: 51-52; United States 2011: A-50; Castle 1993: 10; Leary 1999; Patti 1980: 417).

### **1954 Geneva Conference**

In November 1953, the French occupied Dien Bien Phu with the objective being to establish a blockade to prevent the Viet Minh from entering Laos (Brocheux and Hemery 2011: 370). By January 1954, Dien Bien Phu was encircled by the Viet Minh and it fell in May (Dommen 1971: 42). Soon thereafter the Geneva Conference was convened to seek a settlement of the First Indochina war, and on July 21, 1954 the war came to an end. Characterized by Arthur Dommen as “a bag full of contradictions” in view of the fact that the accords were negotiated in the geopolitical interests of the Western nations, the Soviet Union, and the People’s Republic of China (Dommen 2001: 255; Rust 2012: 7).

The United States viewed itself as “an interested nation” that was neither a belligerent nor a principal in the negotiation” (Rust 2012: 7). William Rust went on to say that the “US government did not sign the Geneva Accords but pledged, in the words of a Dulles press statement, that it “would not seek by force to overthrow the settlement” (Rust 2012: 7).

On June 29, Prince Savang together with Laotian Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, met in Paris with America’s chargé in Saigon, McClintock, and expressed concern that “in [the] framework of a cease-fire or armistice covering Vietnam, [the] present French Government might be willing to grant concessions to [the] Viet Minh which would be injurious to Laotian sovereignty and territorial integrity” (FRUS 1982, June 29, 1954: Document 1005). Savang went on to say that “he would like assurances from [the] US of American support, both moral and, if possible, material. However, he fully recognized there was no question of US military intervention in Indochina...”

Shortly thereafter on July 1, McClintock met again with Prince Savang who “said that he had 1,500 Maquis [which probably included Hmong] inside Sam Neua Province and could at any time he desired take [Pathet Lao-occupied] Sam Neua town. However, he did not wish to provoke Viet Minh reprisals...” (FRUS 1982, July 1, 1954: Document 1011).

Although the negotiations focused mainly on Vietnam, “The Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Laos” was signed by the French and Vietnamese on July 22 and “provided for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of French and Viet Minh forces from Laos, a prohibition against introducing foreign military personnel into Laos (except for a French military training mission to be limited to 1,500 men, and a prohibition against foreign bases (with the exception of Seno)” (Dommen 2001: 259).

The West argued that it was the Viet Minh who invaded northern Laos in April 1953 and central Laos in December and that after they were withdrawn the Royal Lao Government (RLG)

would be able to resolve its internal affairs (Rust 2001: 7). On the other hand, the communist nations maintained that there were significant “local resistance forces” in Laos whose interests should be accommodated.

Accordingly, Vietnam was divided into two zones and Viet Minh-backed pro-communist Laotian Pathet Lao insurgents were allowed to temporarily regroup in Phong Saly and Sam Neua (also known as Houaphanh) Provinces which, like Xieng Khouang, were contiguous to Viet Minh territory (Brocheux and Hemery 2011: 370). Their ultimate objective was to secure and use these two provinces as a springboard to expand their influence.

On July 21, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) indicated that “during the period between the cessation of hostilities in [Vietnam] and the final settlement of that country’s political problems, the Royal Government of Laos will not request foreign aid, whether in war material, in personnel or in instructors, *except for the purpose of its effective territorial defense* [author’s italics] and to the extent defined by the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. It would not join any foreign military alliance, allow foreign military bases, or request military aid” (FRUS 1981, July 21, 1954: Document 1050).

The RLG also stated that it:

Declares itself resolved to take the necessary measures to integrate all citizens, without discrimination, into the National Community and to guarantee them the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms for which the constitution of the Kingdom provides;

Affirms that all Laotian citizens may freely participate as electors or candidates in general elections by secret ballot;

Announces, furthermore, that it will promulgate measures to provide for special representation in the Royal Administration of the provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua during the interval between the cessation of hostilities and the general elections of the interests of Laotian Nationals who did not support the Royal Forces during hostilities (FRUS 1981, July 21, 1954: Document 1027).

The cease-fire in Laos became effective on August 6 and quiet reigned in Laos (FRUS 1981, August 10, 1954: Document 1117). However, the US charge in Laos suggested to the Department of State that the US should “exert strong pressure on [the] Lao Government and [the International Control] Commission<sup>21</sup> to carry out [the] agreement and reestablish royal authority

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<sup>21</sup> The International Control Commission (ICC) was formed in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Agreements and comprised representatives of India, Canada and Poland. Its attempts to ensure implementation of the Agreements were frustrated by a lack of cooperation from the Pathet Lao, the lack of transportation, and internal disagreements between the members (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 57).

in northern provinces...” (FRUS 1982, October 8 1954: Document 1242). During their meeting on October 13 in Vientiane, Prince Savang assured Rives that the “Lao crown and government would resist Communist menace at whatever cost...” (FRUS 1982, October 13, 1954: Document 1252).

### **North Vietnam’s Post Geneva Intentions**

Before the ink dried on the Geneva Accords, the Vietnamese formed a special “Military Advisor Group” to aid the Pathet Lao Army’ in Phong Saly and Sam Neua. Known as “Group 100,” it was officially created on 16 July 1954 before the ink had dried on the Geneva Accords. The objective of Group 100 was to “transform the Pathet Lao into a military and political force that was able to stand on its own two feet, but without direct Vietnamese military intervention.” Furthermore, as Goscha points out, the cadres had to be able to “block enemy military moves into these two provinces, as well as protect and consolidate the [Pathet Lao’s] administrative presence. The creation of a [Pathet Lao] army was thus crucial” (Goscha 2004: 168-175).

In order to head off the Americans, Christopher Goscha argues that the Vietnamese communists “de-internationalized” their revolutionary concept of Indochina by neutralizing Laos (and Cambodia). By establishing a foothold in the two northeastern provinces and transforming the Pathet Lao into a political and military force capable of taking part in post-Geneva politics, the Vietnamese were “playing a fascinating trans-national role in the making of a new political force in modern Laotian history between 1954 and 1957—one which eventually became a nation-state in 1975 and rules Laos to this day” (Goscha 2010: 61-62; 63).

By supporting the Pathet Lao, the Viet Minh also gained access to nearly 1,300 miles of a highly porous frontier along Vietnam’s border with eastern Laos that provided them with supply routes to support South Vietnamese Communist insurgents in an effort to reunite Vietnam. Accordingly, this “Indochinese space became ‘a strategic unity, a single military theatre of operations,’ in [North Vietnamese] General Vo Nguyen Giap’s own words” (Pholsena 2010: 344).

Nevertheless, “North Vietnam’s role in Laos between 1954 and 1959 was low-keyed, especially as compared with its active military engagements there immediately preceding and following this period” (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 61).

### **Demise of GCMA’s Hmong Maquis**

During the course of the Geneva negotiations the French denied the existence of their intelligence service’s covert paramilitary maquis created in northern and southern Laos. However, the French high command was reluctant to continue supporting the maquis and most of them were demobilized beginning in August 1954. Exceptions were the Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang maquis, known as Groupe Servan and Groupe Malo, respectively. Under the command of Colonel Trinquier, there were 1,800 men in Sam Neua and 1,600 men in Xieng Khouang,

composed of one-third Lao, one-third Hmong, and one-third Khmu (Larteguy and Yang Dao: 1979: 211; Dommen 2001: 310). Their French advisors departed in April 1955 after attempting to transfer their units to the Armee Nationale de Laos (ANL)<sup>22</sup> (Conboy 1995: 15).

A Lao captain was assigned to serve as the counterpart to the French officers during the integration process into ANL's newly-formed Groupe Commando (GC), an effort which was largely unsuccessful with only twenty percent of the Commando unit being Hmong. GC was later (early 1958) expanded into a Bataillon Volontaire (BV), the companies of which were dispersed throughout Sam Neua Province. Most of Xieng Khouang's Hmong maquis scattered, perhaps the sole exception being Lieutenant Vang Pao who took his all-Hmong unit from Nong Het back to the Plain where it was reborn as an ANL Bataillon Volontaire (BV) (Conboy 1995: 16, 18).

### **Hmong Shift Toward the Plain of Jars**

When Touby assumed the position of Chao Muang of the Hmong he relocated from Nong Het to Xieng Khouang town, the capital of the province, and after Geneva he moved to neighboring Lat Houang. These were signals for a vast migration of Hmong from the mountains to settle along the periphery of the Plain of Jars (Yang Dao 1993: 90; Lyfoung 1996: 144, 154). Accordingly, Touby's political base began to shift west and south (Quincy 2000: 85). From Touby's perspective, "the future of the Hmong people lay [away from the mountainous Nong Het area] in the plains with the Lao people and not on the hills, isolated from the rest of the nation" (Lyfoung 1996: 144).

Touby's goal was to enhance the well-being and political status in general of the Hmong people. Being the hub of roads (Routes 6, 7, 13 and 4) from Vietnam, Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Paksane (the latter two cities being in the Mekong valley), the Plain of Jars was a transportation center with an expanding economy (French opium trade being a mainstay). Indeed, the strategic location of the Plain "ensured that its population, and in particular its Hmong population, would play a central role in post-World War II Lao history" (Evans 2002: 139).

Linwood Barney observed that under Touby's leadership "the [Hmong] appear[ed] to be competing consciously in the Lao national society for recognition in many phases of life—political, economic, occupational, educational, and religious" (Barney 1967: 292).

During this period, two American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were established on the Plain of Jars, the Christian and Missionary Alliance and International

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<sup>22</sup> Created in 1952, the Armee Nationale de Laos (ANL) was an outgrowth of the French colonial forces, the French officers of which were withdrawn in 1954. In mid-1959, ANL was renamed Forces Armees du Laos (FAL), and in September 1961 Forces Armees du Royaume (FAR) (Conboy 1995: 21; Conboy 1989: 12; Conboy 1994).

Voluntary Services, Inc., both of which collaborated with Touby Lyfoung in support of the Hmong and served to accelerate social, economic and cultural change among the Hmong.

### **Christian & Missionary Alliance**

Keith Quincy has described Touby's first meaningful experience with Americans as follows:

Touby's calculations were overturned when the North Vietnamese defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, forcing him to turn to the Americans for help. He found the transition difficult. Touby's only real success was with the American missionaries rather than with individuals whose opinions carried weight—the American diplomats, CIA agents, and military attaches who were [soon to become] in charge of Laos' future (Quincy 2000: 98).

Although Protestant missionaries (Rev. and Mrs. Walton Whipple) entered Xieng Khouang for a short period (ca. 1940-1942) before World War II, the first “long-term” American presence on the Plain of Jars dates back to January 1949 when Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) missionaries (Laos Mission 1953-1969)—with Rev. and Mrs. T.J. Adrianoff being the missionaries-in-charge—developed a close relationship with Touby, whose shaman allegedly was the first Hmong convert to Christianity in 1950 (Andrianoff 2001: 48-51; Barney 1956: 62; Adrianoff 1958, January 15, 1958: 11). By 1955, the number of converts escalated to about 5,500 in 96 villages, about seventy percent of which were Hmong (Barney 1957: 69; Thompson and Adloff 1955: 257). Many Hmong young men were chosen from the villages to be trained and sent back to evangelize, teach, and preach in remote villages (Hmong District). Although it is questionable whether Touby converted, many of his family members did, and after realizing the momentum of the movement Touby chose to co-opt those who were caught up in it (Quincy 2000: 101; Barney 1957: 64).

Gary Yia Lee has pointed out that “the Christian faith has a very strong appeal, partly because it originated from Western missionaries, whom the Hmong have traditionally identified as powerful advocates who would deliver them from oppression by other local dominant groups” (Lee 2010: 41-42). Furthermore, it can be argued that the Hmong concept of Heaven was equated with the Christian God (Lee. 2015: 58). Grant Evans wrote that “the US presence, both military and Christian, quickly stimulated dormant millennial yearnings among the Hmong” (Evans 2002: 140; see Tapp 1989: 85-104 and Lee 2015: 141). The story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ may have been viewed as a prophecy of the return of the Hmong messiah (Quincy 2000: 27).

As Paul Hillmer points out, “in addition to bringing the Gospel—and a good dose of Western culture—religious figures [like two C&MA missionaries, William Smalley, a linguist, and Linwood Barney, an anthropologist, and French Oblate missionary Father Yves Bertrais]

carefully observed Hmong culture, speculated on Hmong history and ethnographic origins, and helped create a Hmong writing system [the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) during the period 1951-1953] (Hillmer 2010: 27; Smalley 1990: 151-154).<sup>23</sup> Without a written language the Hmong relied on their memories to retain oral legends and rituals (Lee 2015: 24). Indeed, Smalley noted that there were tales of former Hmong writing systems used and lost in ancestral China, and that writing had been associated with messianic movements in the Hmong past, including the Pa Chay movement (Smalley 1990: 87).

It was said that “the Hmong dreamed of a writing system to fall from heaven as their very own” (Smalley 1990: 88). Not only would the Hmong messiah prove his authenticity by displaying knowledge of the long-lost Hmong script,<sup>24</sup> Seeshia Vang has stated that missionary work “was significant in bringing ‘modern,’ Western ideology to the Hmong of Laos, in particular through the creation of a Hmong script” (Quincy 2000: 25; Vang 2013: 2; see Thao 1999: 46-50).

C&MA maintained a physical presence in Xieng Khouang until January 2, 1960, when the Communists gained control of the Plain of Jars. Virtually all of the Hmong Christian converts had aligned with Vang Pao and sought refuge with his retreating forces and received support as refugees by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as Vientiane-based C&MA (Roffe 1961, January 25, 1961: 6-7, 19; Andrianoff 1961, November 1, 1961: 10-11). It is noteworthy that mostly-American Protestant missionaries continuously worked with the Hmong during the troubled years throughout both the French and American Indochina Wars.

### **International Voluntary Services, Inc.**

One of the first humanitarian organizations to enter Laos was America’s International Voluntary Services (IVS)—a precursor to the Peace Corps—“a non-profit organization formed in 1953 to promote ‘people-to-people’ cooperation in improving health, productivity and living standards and fostering better understanding among peoples” (International Voluntary Services 2003: 1; see Sagnier 2015). With USAID support, the initial IVS program in Laos commenced in March 1956 as the ‘Xieng Khouang Development Project’ based in Phonsavan on the Plain of Jars. An important objective was to provide rural development assistance to an area that was “overrun by the Viet Minh [in 1953] who destroyed livestock and buildings” (Rolston, n.d.: 1).

A key element of IVS’s Xieng Khouang community-development program—which complemented the activities of Filipino-staffed Operation Brotherhood<sup>25</sup> that established

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<sup>23</sup> Lao government officials refused to permit missionaries to teach Hmong as a written language on the grounds that languages in Laos should be written in Lao script (Halpern 1964: 90; Smalley 1990: 152).

<sup>24</sup> Quincy points out that the Hmong took pride in their oral tradition but in their hearts knew writing was power (Quincy 2000: 25).

<sup>25</sup> Beginning in 1963 Operation Brotherhood was funded by USAID. Before that it was largely CIA financed (Central Intelligence Agency Memorandum, July 14, 1960).

medical facilities in Xieng Khouang<sup>26</sup> (Bernad and Fuentecilla 2015; Flores 2010)—was “to aid in the resettlement of a war-torn area by assisting and encouraging refugees and tribal people to seek a settled life” (Bowman 1959: 1). Both Chao Saykham and Touby actively cooperated with IVS and supported their projects in the fields of public health (including clinics), education, agriculture, animal husbandry, and community development, of which training was an important element (Huffman 2004). IVS remained in Xieng Khouang until December 1960 following the August 1960 Kong Le coup.

The services provided by IVS in Xieng Khouang helped Touby fulfill his vision to improve the lives and future of the Hmong population by encouraging them to relocate to the plains together with the Lao people where they could cultivate rice, sell their products in nearby markets, educate their children in local schools, learn the Lao language, enhance social mobility, gain access to medical facilities, overcome prejudices against hilltribe people and become part of the Lao nation (Lyfoung 1996: 144-149). Linwood Barney observed during his time in Xieng Khouang that “the [Hmong] appear to be ready to adopt new techniques and methods if by doing so they think that [Hmong] society can benefit and gain prominence” (Barney 1967: 291).

Retired Indiana farmer Edgar “Pop” Buell,<sup>27</sup> an IVS volunteer who arrived in Laos in mid-1960 and was assigned to the Xieng Khouang project, was subsequently instrumental in developing the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) refugee relief program in northeastern Laos in 1961. During the 1960s, many former IVS volunteers were, like Pop Buell, later employed by USAID and became engaged in refugee relief, community development, public works, and education programs. Many of these ex-IVSers developed close working relationships with their multi-ethnic colleagues while providing a wide-range of humanitarian assistance to Hmong and other ethnic minorities from their Xieng Khouang support centers in Sam Thong and, after its fall in March 1970, Ban Xon.

### **American Diplomatic Relations**

On February 7, 1950, the United States accorded diplomatic recognition to the Kingdom of Laos (Dommen 2001: 198) and at the end of the year opened a legation in Vientiane. In September 1951, an economic aid program was negotiated which was to remain the basis for American aid to Laos for years to come (Dommen 1964: 36). Out of concern about the future of Indochina, in 1953 US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated that the US should play a role in Southeast Asia to prevent the fall of neighboring countries—the first on the list being Thailand, soon to become the most important US ally in mainland Southeast Asia—if French Indochina was to fall to the Communists (Pruessen 2010: 202). On the eve of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, President Eisenhower articulated the “domino” theory and the question arose whether,

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<sup>26</sup> Operation Brotherhood was based initially in Xieng Khouang town (February-June 1957) and later in Ban Ban (June 1957-October 1960), which is situated between Nong Het and Phonesavanh (Bernad 2015 : 52).

<sup>27</sup> See Edgar (Pop) Buell’s field reports (Buell 1962-1999: 1-219; Jacobs 2012: 194-208; Schanche 1970).



in the Cold War era, the Communists or the US should fill the void left behind by the French (Pruessen 2010: 202).

In November 1954, the first US ambassador to Laos, Charles Yost,<sup>28</sup> was appointed, and the United States began supplying direct assistance to Laos through various supporting agencies, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which provided economic and technical assistance, the Program Evaluation Office (PEO),<sup>29</sup> and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The PEO was responsible for overseeing the use of US-supplied military equipment and advising the ambassador on the Lao army's military requirements (Rust 2012: 61). As for the CIA, "in addition to collecting intelligence, countering subversion, and providing arms to anticommunist guerrillas, the CIA played a key role in the internal political affairs of Laos" (Rust 2012: 4).

Shortly after his appointment, Ambassador Yost advised State that the "fall of Laos would have most serious effect on security of free neighbors, particularly Thailand and Cambodia, which would thereby acquire extensive common frontier with Communist bloc vis-à-vis both armed invasion and infiltration, mountainous jungle area separating Laos from Viet Minh and Chinese presents far less penetrable frontier than would [the] Mekong [valley]. Laos [was] therefore of prime importance to strategic Southeast Asia as a whole" (FRUS 1982, December 10, 1954: Document 1374).

### **Auto-Defense Program**

With the objective of preventing the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh from overrunning not only the mountainous areas of Laos, but more importantly, the ethnic Lao-dominated rich riparian plains of the Mekong, in June 1955 an ANL auto-defense program—a direct descendant of the French GCMA maquis units—was organized by the RLG on a limited basis as a militia network that would initially infiltrate Phong Saly Province, one of the two provinces (the other one being Sam Neua) in which the Geneva Agreements allowed the Pathet Lao to regroup. The auto-defense forces in Phong Saly numbered about 3,000 troops under the command of Colonel Ouane [Rathikoune] (FRUS 1990, January 24, 1956: Document 337).

The term "auto-defense" refers, in Laos, "to the organization by Lao army agents and certain tribal leaders of selected civilians in [Phong Saly] and Sam Neua into small resistance groups to undertake small-scale actions against specific targets in Pathet Lao occupied areas. The

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<sup>28</sup> American envoys to Laos between 1950 and 1964 were Donald R. Heath (December 29, 1950-November 1, 1954) and Charles W. Yost (November 1, 1954-August 19, 1955); American ambassadors to Laos between 1955 and 1962 were: Charles W. Yost (August 19, 1955-April 27, 1956), J. Graham Parsons (October 12, 1956-February 8, 1958), Horace H. Smith (April 9, 1958-June 21, 1960), Winthrop G. Brown (July 25, 1960-June 28, 1962), and Leonard S. Unger (July 25, 1962-December 1, 1964).

<sup>29</sup> PEO was a civilian alternative to a Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG). On April 19, 1961, PEO Laos was renamed MAAG Laos (Conboy 1994: 33). MAAG subsequently left Laos in October 1962 in accordance with the 1962 Geneva Agreement.

resistance groups are furnished food, clothing, money and arms as necessary by the army” (FRUS 1990, January 10, 1956: Doc. 336).

As the contest in the two northern provinces continued, the first large-scale US government-sponsored relief initiative was conducted during the second half of 1955 and consisted of some 200 missions by Civil Air Transport’s (CAT)<sup>30</sup> C-46 airplanes, airdropping 1,000 tons of rice and salt to about 26 reception areas in five northern famine-stricken provinces, including Phong Saly, Sam Neua, and Xieng Khouang Provinces (Moore 1995: 110; Rust 2012: 36; Anonymous 1955: 4–6). Known as “Operation Ricedrop,” these relief flights marked the beginning of direct assistance by the United States to ethnic minorities—including Hmong—in the mountainous borderlands, whose political and military potential was gaining recognition (Rust 2012: 37).

In September 1956, the CIA station chief in Vientiane, Milton J. Clark,<sup>31</sup> proposed to the US ambassador that a Refugee and Relief Rehabilitation program should be set up in Sam Neua and Phong Saly. “We feel [that a] bold, dramatic move of this type has not only humanitarian aspects in relieving the suffering of the people, but also should be of immense propaganda value to the government in supporting its position and detracting from the Pathet Lao attacks on the Royal Regime” (Rust 2012: 49–50).

Quinim Pholsena, the National Assembly’s delegate from Sam Neua, “believed that the only solution was to provide arms to the population so they could defend their own villages against the Pathet Lao, and this was done to some extent with the [Hmong]. The on-again, off-again negotiations between the [RLG] and the Pathet Lao—which began shortly after the National Assembly approved the Katay government in October 1954—broke down completely in April [1956]” (Dommen 2001: 314, 322).

The principal advocate of this type of guerrilla force since early 1955 had been Prince Savang Vatthana who “viewed it as an alternative to major offensive action by the Lao army as a means of disrupting Pathet Lao supply and communication lines in the disputed provinces and of preventing Communist consolidation of political control over the local population” (FRUS 1990, January 10, 1956: Doc. 336).

In a memo to Director of Central Intelligence Alan Dulles, General Erskine, the Secretary of Defense’s Special Operations Director, reiterated that “higher priority and more support

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<sup>30</sup> From 1953 to 1974 air transportation service (provided initially by Civil Air Transport, known as CAT, and later by its direct descendent, CIA-owned Air America, by Bird and Sons, and by Continental Air Services, Inc.) were to become key players in providing essential air drops and air support services (Leary 1999; Leeker 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Beginning with Milton Clark, CIA station chiefs in Laos included: Henry Hecksher replaced Clark in mid-1957, Gordon L. Jorgensen replaced Hecksher in March 1960, Charles S. Whitehurst replaced Jorgensen in July 1962, Douglas S. Blaufarb replaced Whitehurst in May 1964, Theodore Shackley replaced Blaufarb in July 1966, Larry Devlin replaced Shackley in August 1968, Hugh Tovar replaced Devlin in September 1970, and Daniel Arnold replaced Tovar May 1973.

[should] be accorded [CIA] operations in Laos... [to] bolster Lao resistance to Communism.” He went on to suggest that auto-defense operations “should be designed to harass enemy lines of communication and arouse hill tribes and villages against Pathet Lao in occupied areas” and that “higher priority and more support be accorded Lao CIA operations.” While it was doubted that the auto-defense technique would “permit a final disposition” of the Pathet Lao from Phong Saly and Sam Neua, it would “perhaps generate a situation in which the regular armed forces of Laos will ultimately be enabled to eliminate these groups” (FRUS 1990, February 13, 1956: Document 344).

With ANL recruiting local inhabitants, during 1956 weapons were provided by the US with the CIA providing advisory support (Conboy 1995: 16; FRUS 1990, April 18, 1956: Document 351). Essentially a village defense program, auto-defense was a concept which the Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma<sup>32</sup> enthusiastically embraced in 1956 and by late 1957 was developed into reality (FRUS 1990, December 16, 1957: Doc. 514).

As of early 1956, “the Lao Government’s program of arming civilians in the two Pathet Lao provinces and organizing small-scale commando action behind Pathet Lao lines [was] proceeding steadily and will shortly be stepped up” (FRUS 1990, February 20, 1956: Document 345).

In August 1956, US Ambassador J. Graham Parsons recommended the implementation of a clandestine program—wherein US involvement was supposed to remain hidden—in the form of strengthening Lao capabilities for propaganda and for countering espionage, sabotage, and guerrilla operations that would strengthen the ability of the RLG to resist subversion and penetration by the Pathet Lao, one element of which was the Laotian auto-defense program (Rust 2012: 49-50).

With the formation of the first coalition government in 1957, the auto-defense program was disbanded in 1958; however, following the collapse of the coalition that led to the renewal of the civil war in mid-1959 the program was reinstated on a countrywide basis as a village defense network (Conboy 1995: 23).

## **First Coalition**

A two-year period of negotiations from 1956 to 1958 between the Pathet Lao and the RLG resulted in the signing of a joint communique announcing the formation of the first

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<sup>32</sup> Prime ministers between 1950 and 1975 were: Phoui Sananikone (February 24, 1950 – October 15, 1951), Savang Vatthana (October 15, 1951 – November 21, 1951), Souvanna Phouma (November 21, 1951 – October 25, 1954), Katay Don Sasorith (October 25, 1954 – March 21, 1956), Souvanna Phouma (March 21, 1956 – August 17, 1958), Phoui Sananikone (August 17, 1959 – December 31, 1959), Sounthone Pathammavong (December 31, 1959 – January 7, 1960), Kou Abhay (January 7, 1960 – June 3, 1960), Somsanith Vongkottrattana (June 3, 1960 – August 15, 1960), Souvanna Phouma (August 30, 1960 – December 13, 1960), Quinim Pholsena (December 11, 1960 – December 13, 1960), Boun Oum (December 13, 1960 – June 23, 1962), and Souvanna Phouma (June 23, 1962 – December 2, 1975), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Laos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prime_Minister_of_Laos), last accessed November 13, 2015.

coalition government on November 12, 1957, with two of the conditions being the re-establishment of RLG's administration over Phong Saly and Sam Neua and the integration of Pathet Lao soldiers into ANL (Dommen 2001: 337-338). Accordingly, the two provinces were re-occupied by ANL and two battalions of Pathet Lao troops (mostly mountain tribesmen, including Hmong members of the Second Battalion which was under the command of Thao Tou Yang) were grouped in Xieng Ngeun (south of Luang Prabang, the royal capital) and at a former French outpost on the Plain of Jars. The integration was formally agreed upon and took place on February 18, 1958, although difficulties ensued (Dommen 2001: 337-338; Fall 1969: 100; Brown and Zasloff 1986: 62; Lee 2015: 300). Laos was finally reunified.

Leading up to the May 1958 supplementary National Assembly election, Operation Booster Shot, a CIA supported civic action-related crash economic aid program, was launched (Rust 2012: 83). Geared to influence the outcome of the election, the operation involved the aerial delivery of a wide range of supplies to rural locations that were subject to intense Pathet Lao propaganda. Some 1,135 tons were airlifted and 300 tons were dropped by CAT and the US Air Force to over fifty locations, including sites in Phong Saly and Sam Neua (Anthony 1993: 15-19).

Touby Lyfoung ran for Xieng Khouang's seat in the National Assembly (and won) because he believed "that it would be a very good opportunity to use oral arguments and words of reconciliation with the Pathet Lao at the National Assembly to resolve our differences. I wanted the Pathet Lao to realize that sitting at the table and talking was a better way to resolve problems" (Lyfoung 1996: 157).

Following the election, the first coalition government collapsed eight months after its formation (Stuart-Fox 1997: 104), and on August 18, 1958, the Lao National Assembly approved a right-wing government with Phoui Sananikone as prime minister that excluded the Pathet Lao. Regarding the new prime minister, Touby observed that "he did not tolerate any opposition. Thus, one could foresee that the country was only heading towards greater turmoils" (Lyfoung 1996: 158).

By May 1959, all of the Pathet Lao forces had not yet been integrated into the ANL, and on May 14 the RLG issued an ultimatum demanding the two Pathet Lao battalions to either accept integration or resign from military service (Rust 2012: 116). On the night of May 18, 1959, the Pathet Lao troops formerly of the Second Battalion on the Plain of Jars but still under the command of Colonel Thao Tou Yang (Lee 2015: 297; Conboy 1995: 21), together with their dependents, chose to escape and they retreated to the southeast towards the Vietnam border (Fall 1969: 105; see Lee 2015: 301).<sup>33</sup> ANL's half-hearted attempt to block their escape was

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<sup>33</sup>Thao Tou Yang was Vang Pao's childhood friend and he later tried to persuade Thao Tou to defect when he was encamped on the Plain. Thao Tou was later killed in a jeep accident on January 13, 1961 near Xieng Khouang allegedly following a Hmong guerrilla ambush (Conboy 1995: 28 footnote). His Vietnamese driver survived the

unsuccessful. The only genuine pursuit was carried out by Vang Pao whose troops caught up with the Pathet Lao near Muang Ngan adjacent to the border but were allegedly unable to halt their retreat allegedly due to a shortage of ammunition (Quincy 2000: 139-142; Conboy 1995: 19). Several months later, on August 8, a segment of the Pathet Lao unit awaiting integration in Xieng Ngeun fled northeast (Conboy 1995: 19).

On May 24, the RLG formally declared the Pathet Lao action an act of rebellion for which there the only solution would be military action (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 67). Arthur Dommen described the failed coalition as being “little more than an experiment, [with a] short life [that] had been beset by turmoil and external pressures” (Dommen 1971: 111; Pholsena 2010: 341; Dommen 2001: 337-338; Stuart-Fox 1997: 99-104; Rust 2012).

Christopher Goscha argues that the ensuing Lao crisis of May 1959 was a turning point in North Vietnamese policy towards Laos and in the future of the Pathet Lao and that it would “not be indifferent if a military intervention occurs in Laos due to the intervention conspiracy of the American imperialists.” The Vietnamese clearly feared the emergence of a very hostile bloc on their western border in the form of direct or even indirect US intervention in Laos, RLG’s collaboration with South Vietnam’s Ngo Dinh Diem against the expansion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the making of a wider Lao–Thai military alliance (sealed increasingly by trans-Mekong kinship ties) (Goscha 2004: 176).

### **America’s Introduction to the Hmong**

Although the CIA focused more on the political arena between 1955 and 1960, it did keep an eye open for opportunities in the paramilitary sphere (Rust 2012: 4; Ahern 2006: 4; Blaufarb 1977: 137),<sup>34</sup> and in May 1955, only one month after the French maquis commander departed, Touby and Chao Saykham told Ambassador Charles Yost that their partisans previously allied with the French would be willing to participate in guerrilla action (FRUS 1990, May 31, 1955: Doc. 297). In April 1956, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the CIA operations in Laos “be expanded to permit the additional arming of the Auto-Defense Forces currently operation in the provinces of [Phong Saly] and Sam Neua” (FRUS 1990, April 18, 1956: Document 351).

It was recognized [by the Americans] early on that the “[Hmong] have had an impressive record as guerrillas which has tended to make [the RLG] uneasy,” and that the RLG “has not undertaken sufficiently [an] imaginative and concrete program to alleviate problems in these areas, and has lacked vigor in promoting better relations.” Some of the mistrust [between Hmong and Vientiane] was due to the fact that “Xieng Khouang has always maintained independent

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accident (Lee 2015: 301-302; Vang 2012: 163-164). Thao Tou’s successor in 1963 as commander of Pathet Lao troops was Fong Tongsee Yang, also known by his Lao name General Paseut (Lee 1982: 202, 219 footnote).

<sup>34</sup> Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. was a CIA Operations Officer in Xieng Khouang in the early 1960s and Douglas S. Blaufarb was the CIA’s Station Chief in Laos from May 1964 – July 1966.

feeling of apartness. Prewar [Hmong] oriented their thriving export business toward Tonkin rather than Mekong” (FRUS 1990, April 24, 1956: Doc. 352). However, the auto-defense program served to reduce the sense of uneasiness between Hmong and the RLG (FRUS 1990, April 24, 1956: Doc. 352).

It is mostly likely that in view of the activities described above, including the auto-defense program, US military intelligence and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began to obtain intelligence from the ANL and its anti-Communist guerrilla activity about conditions and military activity that included information about the involvement of Hmong in the two Communist-controlled provinces, as well as Xieng Khouang Province.

### **The Civil War Resumes**

In July 1959, Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao attacks, the latter under the command of Thao Tou Yang (Quincy 2000: 143), on FAL outposts in Sam Neua to regain control in primarily ethnic minority-populated northeastern Laos created 40,000 refugees, including Hmong, thereby leading to the resumption of the civil war which, aside from a short pause in 1962, continued until 1973 (Stevenson 1972: 72; Chandler 1969: 790; Pholsena 2010: 341; Dommen 2001: 379-380). Other evacuees from Sam Neua town, the province’s capital, were Operation Brotherhood’s hospital staff and Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) missionaries, including American Father Lucien Bouchard<sup>35</sup> who, together with French Father Yves Bertrais, worked closely with the Hmong in the province (Bernad 2004; Bouchard 2014).

Stuart-Fox argued that the outbreak of fighting in 1959 took on a significant ethnic dimension. The FAL consisted mainly of lowland Lao whose officers shared ethnic disdain for Hmong and Khmu, and little had been provided by the RLG to improve their living conditions (Stuart-Fox 1997: 109). Indeed, a PEO intelligence report stated that “the Catholic priests in the area offered the opinion that the Lao would stand or fall in the area depending upon the cooperation they secured from the various tribal minorities...[who] were reported to hate the Communists.” One missionary went on to say that:

All tribesmen (minorities) would fight for and with either the Americans or the French, but not with the Lao. He elaborated that Laos had on too many occasions broken their promises and recalled Operation Booster Shot...during which many rice and salt drops had been witnessed by [Hmong] but not one kilo of which was given to starving tribesmen in his parish (Sparrow August 13, 1959).

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<sup>35</sup> An American Catholic priest, Father Bouchard spoke Hmong and worked and lived with the Hmong in Luang Prabang, Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces throughout most of his time in Laos from 1956-1975 (Bouchard 2014).

On August 4, 1959 the RLG declared a state of emergency in Sam Neua, and Prince Savang's initial reaction was to instruct the government to mobilize the necessary forces to expel the invaders. Later in the month, the fighting took a turn for the worse and the RLG extended the state of emergency to the entire country on September 4 (Dommen 2001: 379). Shortly thereafter, on October 29, King Sisavang Savang passed away and pro-Western Prince Savang Vatthana ascended the throne.

The Pathet Lao attacks in Sam Neua Province prompted FAL to recruit a new maquis by drawing upon the Groupe Commando unit described earlier. Funded by the United States, the FAL plan was to implement the Auto Defense de Choc concept in areas of insurgent activity and form full-time ADC units, which included 4,000 Hmong who were mobilized in Sam Neua (Conboy 1995: 22-23). By September 1, 1959, some 1,800 ADC guerrillas were being trained in Xieng Khouang, and 1,900 in Sam Neua by the FAL (Conboy 1995: 23). But FAL encountered difficulties in recruiting volunteer guerrillas: "Local males were heard to say that they don't want to bear arms, remembering that promises of pay and amenities made by Lao military [during the] 1954-57 period were not kept" (Sparrow August 13, 1959).

### **White Star Arrives**

By 1959 the United States was funding 100 percent of the Lao military budget and the RLG was dissatisfied with the deteriorating quality of training provided by the French (Rust 2012: 110).

Following America's negotiations with the French—headed by John Heintges, the new PEO chief assigned to Laos—it was agreed that they would share training responsibilities with the French. The US would provide technical training (e.g. how to use weapons and equipment), and the French were made responsible for unit and tactical training (i.e. how to use weapons and equipment in the field) (Wing 1964: C13). A training agreement that offered joint military assistance in compliance with the Geneva Accords was submitted to the RLG in June 1959 and a coordinated approach was established (Rust 2012: 111).

Recognizing that the ANL needed to be rejuvenated, as early as May 1958 the US considered dispatching military training teams to Laos, and by the end of July 1959 the first group of US Army Special Forces advisors—best known as White Star—arrived in Laos dressed in civilian clothes as part of Operation Hotfoot. Coincidentally, their arrival took place as the Communists launched their offensive in Sam Neua Province, and as the dust settled White Star's training teams—under civilian cover and attached to the PEO—were put on hold until September 1, at which time they were assigned to five different training centers. In the meantime, CAT airdropped supplies to FAL outposts in Sam Neua. One month after the White Star training activities commenced, a team was sent to Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars, the site of an old GCMA training center (Conboy 1994: unpaginated; Conboy 1995: 20-25). It was in the vicinity of Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars that the PEO came into contact with Major Vang Pao.

By September 1959, in view of the switch-back to a fighting strategy the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao decided to replace North Vietnam's Group 100 with an upgraded unit known as Group 959 which was headquartered at Na Kay, just inside the border with Sam Neua. Group 959 would provide logistical support to the Pathet Lao and directly command the Vietnamese volunteer units operating in Sam Neua, Xieng Khouang, and Vientiane (Dommen 2001: 380).

### **Vang Pao Enters the Scene**

Vang Pao was recognized largely because of his military achievements under the French and the Lao. His relationship with the French began in 1947 when he joined the colonial police in Xieng Khouang Province. In March 1948 he attended a French non-commissioned officers' (NCO) school in Luang Prabang, after which he was posted to a remote village police garrison at Muang Ngan in eastern Xieng Khouang Province.

Impressed with his combat performance against Viet Minh intrusions, the French sent Vang Pao to the ANL's Officer Candidate School at Dong Hene, from which he graduated in 1952. He was then posted as commander of an ANL unit at Muang Hiem located north of the Plain of Jars, and in the spring of 1953 his mostly Hmong unit was forced to the Plain during the Viet Minh invasion, from which point his unit was transferred to a GCMA maquis that operated in the vicinity of his home town, Nong Het. While Dien Bien Phu was under siege in early 1954, Hmong reinforcements—one column under the command of Vang Pao—were dispatched to reinforce the French but failed to reach the outpost before it fell (Conboy 1995: 60).

After Geneva and the demise of GCMA maquis in August 1954, Vang Pao was promoted to captain in December and assumed command of ANL's Hmong guerrilla elements in Xieng Khouang. In 1958 he underwent further command training in Vientiane, and was then sent to the Philippines to participate in counterinsurgency training. Vang Pao was then sent back to Xieng Khouang in early 1959 and served as director of a NCO school at Khang Khay. Soon thereafter, the school was closed and he was assigned commander (by then Vang Pao was a major) of a mixed lowland Lao and Hmong battalion. Subjected to threats by lowland Lao who resented serving orders from an ethnic tribesman, Vang Pao sought refuge with the White Star detachment at Khang Khay in early 1960 (Conboy 1995: 60).

Most probably the CIA first became aware of Vang Pao sometime between 1956 and 1958 from intelligence reports received from ANL's ADC units (Blaufarb 1977: 138). In December 1958, a CIA operative assigned to PEO, Jack Mathews (stationed in Laos from October 1958-November 1960), was introduced by a French officer to Vang Pao in Phonesavanh. This initial meeting subsequently led to airdrops of rice, salt, and blankets to Vang Pao's followers sometime in 1959 (Mathews 1993). Mathews kept in touch with Vang Pao, and travelled with him to many remote villages, including Nong Het (Mathews 1990).

Stuart Methven, a CIA case officer who was assigned to Laos in August 1959 (Prados 2003: 97), said that he met Vang Pao in Ban Ban at the Operation Brotherhood hospital and



explored ways to work with the Hmong to set up an effective paramilitary program. However, Vang Pao's first priority was his people. Desperately in need of assistance, Methven indicated that he arranged for airdrops of blankets and rice to Vang Pao's people in the vicinity of his hometown, Nong Het. However, according to Methven, "before saying goodbye [Vang Pao] took me aside reminding me 'not to forget the guns.' [Vang Pao] eventually got his guns, enough to arm the largest 'clandestine army in history'" (Methven 2008: 63-75; Hillmer 2010: 82).

Recognizing that the only prospect for effective resistance in the northeast now lay with the Hmong, the Pentagon asked the CIA to provide 2,000 carbines to Major Vang Pao in late 1960 after the Kong Le coup (see Kong Le section below). Not only was Vang Pao the highest ranking Hmong in the army, "he had emerged as one of the most influential figures in the loose federation of Hmong clans inhabiting the mountains of northern Laos. These credentials had made him the obvious choice to supervise distribution of the carbines..." (Ahern 2006: 29).

In view of the fact that Touby had relocated to Vientiane and that Vang Pao had considerable military experience, he was the obvious candidate to lead any effort—political or military—to keep Xieng Khouang Province under Vientiane's control (Ahern 2006: 29). Similar to inter-clan leaders before him, Vang Pao's rise to power depended largely on collaborating with powerful foreigners. Having worked with Touby Lyfoung and the French, he understood the importance of such collaborations (Vang 2010: 25).

Subsequent events showed the [Hmong] as the one force in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang<sup>36</sup> that could resist the Pathet Lao, and attention again focused on the tribesmen. Their command structure was reorganized, and they were eventually trained and -equipped for intelligence gathering and paramilitary operations in the enemy's rear. Vang Pao welcomed this development, for it meshed with his desire to weaken clan and village loyalties and concentrate his people into larger political units (Wing, *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp C-:29, C-30; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A-65, Aug 30, 1971; Anthony, pg. 44).

### **Hmong Leadership Transition**

During the French era, Touby:

gained a great deal of favor because of the way in which he was able to smooth the way toward more equitable treatment of the Hmong by the French and the Lao, and [in so doing] enabled Hmong villages to get schools and economic advantages (such as facilitating the sale of opium to the French government opium monopoly). It was therefore sometimes

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<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that four Military Regions (MRs) were formed in Laos in 1955, two of which encompassed northern Laos: MR 2 covered Xieng Khouang, Pathet-Lao held Sam Neua, Borikhane, and Vientiane Provinces, and MR 1 included Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Houa Khong, and Pathet-Lao held Phong Saly Provinces (Conboy 1995: 14). In July 1959, FAR concluded that MR 2 was too large for a single command and split off Vientiane Province which became MR 5. The headquarters for MR 2 shifted to Xieng Khouang town (Conboy 1995: 22).

very helpful to be protected by Touby's umbrella. Many Hmong people also took pride in him and his accomplishments (Smalley 1990: 14).

However, "new Hmong leaders emerged when new patrons with different agendas arrived" (Lee 2005: 356). Touby Lyfoung's influence waned as the French withdrew from Laos, and in 1958 he moved from Lat Houang to Vientiane to assume his supporting role in Hmong politics, initially as an elected member of the National Assembly and, later, he was selected to hold ministerial positions.<sup>37</sup>

As the French pulled out, Vang Pao became known to the Americans as "a brave and able officer in the Lao army [who] had risen rapidly because of his courage and ability in the fight against the Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies, [and who, together with his men] had been resisting the Vietnamese with almost no resources" (Smalley 1990: 15).

Nevertheless, while Vang Pao and his forces were subsequently supplied and supported by the United States, during the transition from the French to the Americans the Ly clan continued to dominate the administration of patronage and promotion and Vang Pao recognized the importance of continuity of leadership and ethnic loyalty (Lee 2005: 347-348; Lee 2015: 41). Early on, "Vang Pao had said that no one (including himself) 'dared' to make a decision without Touby..." (Lee 2005: 356-357).

On the other hand, early signs of rivalry between Vang Pao and Touby surfaced, an example emerging at Pa Dong as early as 1961 when it became evident that Touby's political standing was waning due to his tendency to remain in Vientiane while Vang Pao lived with the people (Roberts 1961: 7). For various reasons, "by 1965 Vang Pao stopped listening to Touby" (Lee 2005: 357). Indeed, as the war escalated various clan leaders began to question and challenge Vang Pao's authority (Quincy 2000: 252-253; Lee 2015: 309-311).

Over time, Touby questioned Vang Pao's strategy of using "a lot of weapons and soldiers to make war. In my mind, I believed that following such a course of action would result in great losses of soldiers, which in the long run would be fatal to our forces and would only be drained of our manpower. To thus sacrifice our soldiers' lives to resist the Viet Minh would be as effective as pouring drops of water to extinguish a raging fire" (Lyfoung 1996: 177).

On the communist side, Faydang's patrons were initially Vietnamese-supported Japanese during World War II followed by the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. While Faydang served as the political leader of his followers, his military leader Thao Tou Yang effectively served as Vang Pao's counterpart as military leader of Pathet Lao's Hmong soldiers (see Gunn 1988: 234).

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<sup>37</sup> Touby Lyfoung's successors as Chao Muang of Muang Meo were Chia Xa Moua (assassinated in 1958), and, subsequently, Tong Pao Ly. In about 1967-68 Muang Meo, was divided into five Muangs (Muang Vang Xay, Muang Vieng Fa, Muang Nong Het, Muang Xieng Hung, and Muang Ngat) (Email from Yang Dao dated January 23, 2015; Administrative Structure: 1-13). Regarding the assassination, see Vang 2012: 46 who said that it took place in May 1959).

Indeed, “as far as the Pathet Lao were concerned Thao Tou [was] very much a national hero and the ‘incarnation of bravery and intelligence’” (Gunn 1988: 243 footnote). Although Faydang was largely unsuccessful in gaining the allegiance of more than a minority of the Hmong, he remained leader of those Hmong who backed the Pathet Lao until his death on July 12, 1986.

### **Ethnic Minorities**

As described by Bernard Fall, “the people of Laos are about as variegated as its terrain is chaotic” (Fall 1969: 24). Historically, the Lao government’s authority barely extended into the borderland territories of mountain tribes because of their almost total lack of political organization and age-old animosities between them and the lowland Lao (Dommen 1964: 272-273). Not only did the Hmong cherish independence, they saw the lowlanders as a threat. Furthermore, they were regarded with contempt and discriminated against by the authorities (Blaufarb 1977: 133).

Against this backdrop of Laos’ ethnically and geographically complex landscape, in early August 1959, US Ambassador Horace H. Smith stated that “the majority of Thai, Meo [Hmong] and Kha [Khmu] ethnic minorities are hostile to the [RLG] which explains the active or passive aid which the rebels secure or may secure from the countryside” (FRUS 1992, August 9, 1959: Document 239).

Shortly thereafter, Smith went on to say that:

the crux of the problem now faced both politically and militarily seems to lie with the minorities. Past Lao governments have apparently refused to admit the existence of a major ‘minorities’ problem. Even the present RLG had found it difficult to take adequate measures to recognize and meet it. American suggestions for a more direct approach were turned down tactfully by [Prime Minister] Phoui [Sananikone] last winter who preferred to try to meet the need through a general rural self-help program rather than any moves especially keyed to the minorities (FRUS 1992, August 24, 1959: Document 248).

J. Graham Parsons, former US ambassador to Laos and currently Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, stated that it was necessary to “stress to the RLG the urgent need for major efforts to remove antagonisms and suspicions among minority peoples in Laos (who together outnumber the Lao in Laos). These minority peoples will otherwise be highly susceptible to Communist pressures” (FRUS 1992, September 1, 1959: Document 251).

In November 1959, US Secretary of State Herter noted that “minorities within Laos, as recent events have proved, live in crucial areas and special efforts should be put forward to orient them toward the Royal Lao Government (RLG) [by] taking measures to attract their loyalty if the nation is to be preserved” (FRUS 1992, November 5, 1959: Document 285, 9). In a telegram to

Secretary Herter, Ambassador Smith outlined his views on minorities' problems and possible solutions, one option being the appointment of Touby Lyfoung as leader of a RLG department of ethnic affairs (FRUS 1992, August 29, 1959: Telegram 466, Document 234).

In a telegram dated December 16, Ambassador Smith stated that the "minority problem, while attracting greater attention lately from US agencies, [is] still relatively untouched by RLG,"<sup>38</sup> although the majority in the National Assembly favored the creation of a secretariat of state for minorities (FRUS, December 16, 1959: Document 303).

The Pathet Lao took a different approach in dealing with ethnic minorities. Ethnic diversity and inequality played a singular role in the growth of the communist movement in Laos (Brown and Zasloff: 1986: 270). Following the August 1950 congress in Vietnam, the Pathet Lao took action to form a united movement and sought to win "hearts and minds" by telling the minorities that they were subject to discrimination by the Lao government. Important components of both the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese armies were ethnic minorities. Faydang wished for "equality for all races" wherein the ethnic groups of Laos "were allies and comrades on a basis of complete equality [with] minority and majority peoples...forged into a single, real national entity" (Burchett 1959: 232). Indeed, Faydang told Burchett that "relations between themselves and the [Lao] were like those in one family" (Burchett 1959: 233)

Perhaps it could be argued that both Touby and Vang Pao shared Faydang's wish that highland Hmong would become a semi-autonomous society with a "leader as the unifying element that transcends clan divisions" within an accommodating nation-state that provides "a protective shield against rapid, catastrophic assimilation" (Lee 2015: 22). No doubt all three Hmong leaders recognized, as Mai Na Lee points out, that "being recent migrants to Southeast Asia [the Hmong] could not build a reliable case of having a claim to any land" covering a "contiguous, expansive territory" (Lee 2015: 20-21).

After 1956, the Pathet Lao "called for national unity irrespective of race or religious convictions; attention to education, 'especially of mountain people'; policies for helping 'the various nationalities to live on an equal footing'; and opposition to 'all schemes of sowing discord among the nationalities.'" Thus, the life blood of the Lao communist movement was finally rooted firmly in the eastern mountain villages" (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 271).

Nevertheless, the Communists were by no means successful in winning over all of the tribal people owing to the fact that they alienated segments of the population by imposing harsh demands incompatible with their way of life that jeopardized their autonomy (Halpern 1964: 93).

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<sup>38</sup> Although the Hmong repeatedly affirmed their loyalty to the king, it has been surmised that the close correlation of the Buddhist religion and the Lao monarchy, and therefore the royal government, may have served as an obstacle in their dealings with minorities who were not of the Buddhist faith and tradition (Halpern 1964: 115).

## Kong Le Coup

The year 1960 was a turning point in Lao history. On August 9, 1960, American-trained Captain Kong Le who, at age 26, commanded an elite parachute battalion (Mathews 1993), led a coup in Vientiane against the two-month old Prime Minister Somsanith government that ultimately “put [Neutralist] Prince Souvanna Phouma in power” (Rust 2012: 177). While there are several versions of what Kong Le’s intentions were,<sup>39</sup> “he was a man filled with grievances, most of them justified, which he summed up in the phrase ‘Why should Lao fight Lao?’” (Dommen 2001: 389; see Lyfoung 1996: 165-166)

Shortly thereafter, the Pathet Lao started mobilizing their forces in Sam Neua Province. According to Arthur Dommen, “the coup had come as a complete surprise [to the US], and therefore the State Department had no prepared policy on how to deal with its aftermath” (Dommen 1971: 157).

Caught in a bind, US Undersecretary of State C. Douglas Dillon indicated that “as a result of the Sam Neua situation and requests for our assistance, we had authorized the resupply of various strongpoints between Luang Prabang and Sam Neua, including Xieng Khouang, with ammunition, CAT airplanes, food, and so on. Mr. Dillon said the US was more directly involved in the Laotian situation than it had been in the past” (FRUS 1992, Doc.410: September 29, 1960).

With the fall of Vientiane to Kong Le in December 1960 and the establishment of the Phoumi government, the French withdrew from active participation in the defense-assistance effort. The US immediately expanded and accelerated its military aid to Laos; an increase in the size of military forces to be supported was authorized and the training program enlarged to officially include tactical as well as technical training (Wing 1964: C16).

On December 16, the forces of US-backed right-wing General Phoumi Nosavan,<sup>40</sup> “CIA’s foremost protégé in Laos” (Rust 2012: 178), drove Kong Le’s troops out of Vientiane, and a new Laotian government was established in January 1961 with Boun Oum as Prime Minister and Phoumi as Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister (Dommen 2001: 433-435). Kong Le and his soldiers, which became known as Neutralist Armed Forces (FAN), retreated to the Plain of Jars where he joined forces, as a Neutralist, with the Communist Pathet Lao (assisted by a Hmong battalion under the command of Thao Tou Yang) who, with support from the Soviet Union<sup>41</sup> and North Vietnam, proceeded down Route 7 and overran the Plain by driving out the

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<sup>39</sup> While maintaining loyalty to the king, Kong Le’s aims were to end the civil war, resist foreign pressures, remove foreign troops from Laos, and suppress rampant corruption in Vientiane (Toye 1967: 141).

<sup>40</sup> For a brief description of the relationship between General Phoumi and Kong Le see Dommen 2001: 389 and Rust 2012: 177-178. An overview of Phoumi Nosavan’s background can be found in Toye 1968: 145-1947.

<sup>41</sup> Soviet military activity had been limited to providing an airlift, via North Vietnam, of weapons and supplies to the Pathet Lao and Neutralist forces beginning in December 1960. Their small mission on the Plain was withdrawn and

FAL (Conboy 1995: 43-45; Lee 2015: 301). While the FAL retreated toward Paksane during the first week of January (United States 1961a: 77), Vang Pao's garrison<sup>42</sup> in Xieng Khouang town, which comprised some 4,300 people (Conboy 1995: 61), withdrew to the mountains in good order, first to Tha Vieng and then to Pa Dong (Roberts 1961) along the southern periphery of the Plain.

Not only the Plain was overrun, so were Nong Het and Ban Ban, both situated astride Route 7 which (together with Route 6 via Sam Neua, Muang Peun, and Houa Muong to the Route 6 junction with Route 7 at Ban Ban) connected North Vietnam with the Plain (Conboy 1995: 47). Christopher Goscha observed that "on January 1, 1961, Vietnamese and PL troops took the Plain of Jars, linking it to Sam Neua to create a vast base area along Vietnam's western border" (Goscha 2004: 180).

Throughout the region the number of refugees displaced by the Kong Le – Pathet Lao alliance increased to 90,000 people (Chandler 1969: 790), which included many Hmong. "We are fighting," one Hmong explained, "because they drove us out of our lands and out of our villages, and because they have forced us to live in misery. Our country is all of that [gesturing toward the Xieng Khouang plateau] and we shall defend it at all costs" (Yang Dao 1993: 40).

It became obvious in early January 1961 that a humanitarian USAID refugee relief operation would be necessary for the foreseeable future and that there was a need to strengthen the RLG and American presence in nearly all accessible areas in Laos (USAID 1962a: 123; Benson 2015). Several American NGOs, including CARE and Catholic Relief Services, also hastened to provide humanitarian support.

### **Phoumi Nosavan and the Hmong**

It has been said that "a legacy of the CIA's strong backing for General Phoumi Nosavan in the summer and fall of 1960 was a buildup of bands of guerrilla soldiers among the traditionally independent slope-dwelling [Hmong] tribes of eastern Laos" (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 81). A working arrangement between Touby and Phoumi had been worked out as early as August 1960 when Touby joined Phoumi to organize resistance against Kong Le forces. Linwood Barney surmised that a possibility of Hmong autonomy lured Touby to disassociate his people from the authority in Vientiane during Kong Le's takeover (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 81; Barney 1967: 275).

According to Touxa Lyfoung, Touby went to Xieng Khouang after the coup to discuss the situation with local officers and administrators (Vang Pao was not mentioned in Touby's

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the airlift discontinued by December 1962. Thereafter, North Vietnamese were trained to fly the planes and deliver food and ammunition to the Pathet Lao.

<sup>42</sup> Neither soldiers nor families were prepared to separate in situations where villagers were left behind under enemy control; accordingly, in threatened locations the population base was relocated to secure areas outside the enemy's reach (Blaufarb 1977: 142).

account) and, when asked his opinion, Touby stated that “if one could not be communist and could not drop down one’s gun before the Pathet Lao, and if one could no longer side with the Vientiane government, then there was only one way out: to side with...[General Phoumi in] Savannakhet” (Lyfoung 1996: 167-168).

The governor of Xieng Khouang, Chao Saykham, recognized that the situation would become a total loss unless the Hmong made a stand. According to Vang Pao, Chao Saykham told him that only he could save the situation because he had all of the Hmong behind him (Larteguy and Yang Dao 1979: 214-215).<sup>43</sup> Vang Pao realized that the Hmong could lose their lands, their homes and their entire livelihood if they did not defend themselves (Saykao 2004: 11).

Furthermore, Vang Pao knew that without the support of the Ly clan and Touby he could do nothing, and he proceeded to rally the clan’s leaders. The Hmong had two choices, fight to defend themselves or flee. It was decided that the Hmong would fight (Saykao 2004: 11-12).

While it appears that Vang Pao’s loyalty to Phoumi shortly after the coup was questionable (Dommen 2001: 399),<sup>44</sup> it was said that “to ensure the loyalty of Vang Pao, Phoumi on October 9 and 10 flew two loads of money to the [Plain of Jars] airfield, and on October 11 two shipments of ‘antique weapons’ were rushed from Pakse to the Hmong commander” (Conboy 1995: 45). Phoumi’s action was prompted by Major Vang Pao when he arrested Kong Le’s candidate for the Military Region 2 command post, General Amkha Soukhanvong, and dispatched him to General Phoumi in Savannakhet where he remained imprisoned until June 1962.<sup>45</sup> Vang Pao then declared his loyalty to Phoumi.

### **Hmong Supply Channels**

Political leader Touby, military leader Vang Pao, and General Phoumi (who promoted Vang Pao to Lieutenant Colonel in December 1960) (Conboy 1995: 60) shared concerns about the future of the Plain. However, questions arose regarding the channels through which Vang Pao’s forces would be supplied. Initially (January 6, 1961), there were concerns that “long-standing jealousies and suspicions between the [Hmong] and Lao people...made unlikely Phoumi’s consent to any large scale supply of [Hmong] forces” (United States 1961a: 75).

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<sup>43</sup> Linwood Barney indicated that Chao Saykham met with Touby together with all district chiefs, both Hmong and Lao, and requested their support in breaking away from Vientiane (date unspecified). Barney stated that “the probable reason for this was that Touby and the Governor feared a Communist take-over of the Laotian government and the Governor saw a chance to reassert a claim to Xieng Khouang autonomy” (Barney 1967: 274-275). An alliance was made with Phoumi who proceeded to supply Chao Saykham and Touby with arms.

<sup>44</sup> It was reported that at the request of Touby, the Xieng Khouang military commander had Vang Pao arrested in August 1960 because of his loyalty to the Souvanna Phouma regime. While other references to the arrest incident have not been found, by December Vang Pao had become more-pro-Phoumi (US Department of Defense 1962: 299-300).

<sup>45</sup> A biographical sketch of General Amkha can be found in Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 4-5.

On about January 11, 1961, “concerted and repeated efforts...had failed to persuade Phoumi to authorize direct support to these [Hmong] forces. Phoumi’s adamant position was that the [Hmong] were untrustworthy and primitive; the [Hmong] leaders had hoodwinked the US authorities; and in any event all support must be through the [Forces Armees du Royaume (FAR)] which was already providing adequately for the [Hmong] needs” (United States 1961a: 80). Apparently, it did not come as a surprise to the Department of Defense that Phoumi (and the RLG in general) was reluctant “to provide arms or otherwise to strengthen a native group that had never really been under the control of the central government” (US Department of Defense 1963: 127).

As of that date, the only assistance provided the Hmong was through the FAL channels and not by the US on a direct basis. “The Hmong were ‘crybabies.’ Phoumi said, both too primitive to undertake the raid and sabotage missions that the PEO chief had proposed and too treacherous to be indulged in their incessant demands for help.” However, on January 14 he relented and permitted an airdrop of rice and ammunition to Hmong militia at Ban Khang Kho, a site south of the Plain (Ahern 2006: 33).

### **Vang Pao and CIA’s Project Momentum**

On January 3, 1961, US Military attachés in Bangkok sent in a joint message reporting an interview with two American [USAID] personnel, a [Hmong], and a Chinese who had been evacuated from the Plain of Jars on December 30. Although the idea they presented was not entirely new and had been considered before “without emphasis,” the interview “concentrated on a suggestion made by one of the evacuees [Pop Buell?] that the [Hmong] and Black Thai [Tai Dam] in that area would combat the Pathet Lao if they were trained and supplied. The message concluded by recommending that the proposal be given serious consideration” (US Department of Defense 1963: 126–128; Jacobs 2012: 199-200).

On January 9 or 10, 1961 (Ahern 2006: 30), CIA officer Bill Lair—who had been in contact with Phoumi Nosavan in his Savannakhet headquarters following the coup—met with Vang Pao at his Tha Vieng command post and opened the door to direct communication between the Hmong and CIA (Warner 1995: 35-38). According to Jane Hamilton-Merritt, who is said to be Vang Pao’s authorized biographer,<sup>46</sup> Vang Pao assured Bill Lair that “for me, I can’t live with communism. I must either leave or fight. I prefer to fight” (Hamilton-Merritt 1993: 89).

However, Vang Pao went on to explain to Bill Lair that he had to “seek the support of his people by consulting with clan leaders...” Reminding the elders of Vietnamese decades of aggression and their displacement of many Hmong, Vang Pao advised them “if the Hmong joined with the Americans, the refugees would receive rice and salt until new fields could be found and readied for planting. The American[s] had also promised arms, training, and a commitment to stop communism in Laos” (Hamilton-Merritt 1992: 90). Furthermore, it seems

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<sup>46</sup> As per Hmong scholar Mai Na Lee during conversation on April 10, 2015.



that Vang Pao viewed the US as having been invincible since they were victorious in the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Korean War.<sup>47</sup>

Former station chief of the CIA in Laos Douglas Blaufarb noted that the elders' decision to follow Vang Pao and Touby was "a community decision taken by village family heads," and that "once made, all able-bodied men who were needed were sent forward to Vang Pao for training by his American and Thai allies and deployment in operations" (Blaufarb 1977: 142).

William A. Smalley has said that "fear of the Vietnamese, anger at loss of homeland and destruction of livelihood, opportunities for military and political power, the enormous quantities (by Lao standards) of money supplied by the United States, and hope of a better day to come united many thousands of Hmong behind... Vang Pao and the war effort he led" (Smalley 1990: 15).

From the CIA's perspective, there were several factors that motivated the Hmong:

Primarily it is economic and rests on the determination of the [Hmong] to protect their homeland and their opium rich poppy fields from outside incursions. Secondly it is political in the sense that the [Hmong] are determinedly anti-Communist as they recognize that Communist domination would inevitably upset their entire tribal system. Finally, it is characteristic, because of the rugged individualistic and tribalistic outlook of these mountain people (CIA Project Paper: 1).

From Bill Lair's point of view, "The Hmong appeared determined to fight—they only wanted arms, training, and food" and their commitment was in line with the CIA strategy to "fight insurgencies with counterinsurgency" (Hamilton-Merritt 1993: 89). This suited Lair because "one of his overriding principles [was] to keep any US involvement to a minimum. [Furthermore, Lair] was devoted to the idea of providing indigenous people with training and weapons to protect their own homelands at a minimal cost" (Hamilton-Merritt 1993: 89). With assistance from elite Thai paratroopers (PARU)<sup>48</sup> and White Star, arrangements (codenamed Project Momentum) were made to provide the Hmong with the essentials needed to support and train village-based guerrilla militias, including rice and care for their dependents (Gravel 1971: 646; FRUS 1997, May 9, 1961: Doc. 153; Castle 1993: 42-43).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Based on Hmong scholar Mai Na Lee's interview with Vang Pao as conveyed to the author on April 11, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Since early 1961, the Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) served as guerrilla operations advisors to CIA-organized paramilitary forces in Laos (Conboy 1995: 59). Thailand had been motivated since the nineteenth century to prevent Vietnamese control of the left bank of the Mekong. Thai nationals were actively engaged in fighting in Laos on the side of the government since at least the summer of 1964 (Dommen 1971: 283). For more information about the Thai involvement in Laos, see Sutayut Osornprasop's *Thailand and the Secret War in Laos, 1960-74*.

<sup>49</sup> For more information about Project Momentum see Conboy 1995: 59.

## **Introducing the Kennedy Administration**

On January 20, 1961 the John F. Kennedy administration was inaugurated with President Eisenhower's warning in mind that "communist control of Laos would lead to the 'loss' of all Southeast Asia. It was the 'cork in the bottle,' in Eisenhower's words" (Rust 2012: 258). During Kennedy's first cabinet meeting on January 23 the president "wondered aloud to his advisers 'how specifically we planned to save Laos'...and two days later he told the Joint Chiefs of Staff of his determination to assist the RLG but admitted that he was 'not too optimistic'" (Rust 2012: 259).

The Kennedy administration supported Phoumi's planned offensive to retake the Plain of Jars, and on January 24 the arming of the first 300 Hmong volunteers began when three C-46 cargo planes crossed the Mekong into Laos carrying weapons and equipment (Ahern 2006: 41).

Recovering the Plain was the keystone of the US policy aimed at strengthening the RLG's negotiating position in any political settlement of the civil war (Rust 2012: 259; Ahern 2006: 52). However, Washington's expectations were not realized and the offensive aimed at crushing the Pathet Lao miserably failed in March, thereby significantly weakening the military's presence between the Mekong valley and the rugged borderlands.

Consequently, it became clear that "Vang Pao's guerrillas, and the scattered regular units under his command, had now emerged as the only active opposition to communist and neutralist control of northeast Laos" (Ahern 2006: 55).

On March 9, 1961, President Kennedy signed the "National Security Action Memorandum No. 29" (NSAM-29) which "inaugurated a policy that would characterize American military activity in Laos for more than a dozen years: Extensive CIA paramilitary operations supported by Thailand-based, covert US military agencies" (Castle 1993: 30). According to John Prados, the Kennedy administration's policy on Laos was the special focus of NSAM-29, and that the memorandum was sensitive for national security reasons because the "president's decision ordered the [CIA] to spearhead important initiatives designed to strengthen pro-US Laotian forces, including both combat and supply [i.e. Air America] functions" (Prados 2011). Included was an approval to expand the CIA's Hmong guerrilla program (Conboy 1995: 51). Prados pointed out that the memorandum was not declassified and made available until 2010.

Kennedy introduced the Laos problem to Americans in a nationally televised press conference on March 23, and pointed out the "difficult and potentially dangerous problem there" and went on to say that "if in the past there has been any possible ground for misunderstanding our desire for a truly neutral Laos, there should be none now" (Rust 2012: 259; Dommen 2001: 439):

A 'peaceful solution' to the crisis, however, required an end to Soviet and North Vietnamese intervention, as well as Pathet Lao attacks against the RLG. 'If these attacks do not stop,' Kennedy warned, 'those who support a truly neutral Laos will have to consider their response...No one should doubt our resolution on this point' (Rust 2012: 260).

In spite of Kennedy's "public appeal for negotiations and his thinly veiled threat of intervention the military position of the RLG continued to deteriorate" (Rust 2012: 260), the single bright spot being the CIA program to arm the Hmong as they held their ground against Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese artillery barrages and occasional ground assaults (Dommen 2001: 439). Nevertheless, the main concern of the US continued to be to obtain a cease-fire, and on April 24, 1961 supported a call by the British and Soviets to convene a conference accompanied by an appeal for a cease-fire (Dommen 1971: 197; Dommen 2001: 440).

### **Why the CIA?**

PEO, which managed the assistance flow to FAL troops, also found itself tied up supporting the CIA's relatively small, but increasingly important Hmong force. Under normal circumstances, the Agency's paramilitary activities would have been subordinated to US military command. However, in this case the reason the CIA was charged with working with the Hmong to block Communist intrusion in northeastern Laos was that US military engagement would have conflicted with the administration's commitment to restore neutrality for Laos (Ahern 2006: 56). Former CIA case officer Thomas Ahern went on to say that:

if the program [was] to serve the political purpose of expanding RLG territorial holdings before a cease-fire, the Hmong would require some formal status as part of FAR. Irregulars unilaterally supported by CIA would have no legal standing... The solution was threefold: first to acknowledge some US mission support of Col. Vang Pao, in his capacity as a FAR commander; secondly, to play down the importance of the Hmong militia as a factor in Xieng Khouang Province; and finally, to avoid confirming an Agency role (Ahern 2006: 57).

Initially, the CIA authorized the arming and training of 1,000 men as the first step (Dommen 2001: 433; Ahern 2006: 53). On February 8, 1961, President Kennedy authorized the CIA to arm as many Hmong irregulars as Vang Pao could recruit, but they capped it a 5,000 (in addition to the 2,000 who received carbines in late 1960) (Ahern 2006: 45). By August 1961, the number increased to 12,000 guerrillas (Conboy 1995: 88; Castle 1993: 42-43).<sup>50</sup> Based at various

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<sup>50</sup> By October 7, 1962 when the Geneva agreement went into effect a total of 19,500 guerrillas had been recruited (Rust 2014: 138).

locations on the fringes of the Plain of Jars, the Hmong activities were mainly hit and run blows that were disruptive only and mainly concentrated in the Plain of Jars area.

It was pointed out by Timothy Castle that:

the Hmong were fighters, but they fought only in defense of their own land and lifestyle...[and] felt no allegiance to a country controlled by lowlanders [who they held in contempt]. Therefore, as CIA case officers and their PARU interpreters/assistants moved from village to village, their message to the tribesmen was simple: 'The Vietnamese will soon come to take your land. We [the US] will give you the means to fight and defend your homes. The response was generally favorable (Castle 1993: 38-39).

That the CIA was the principal supporter of the Hmong guerrilla forces was clarified in Edward G. Lansdale's memorandum (possibly written in July 1961) to General Maxwell D. Taylor, President Kennedy's military officer:

Political leadership of the [Hmong] is in the hands of Touby Lyfoung, who now operates out of Vientiane. The military leader is Lt. Col. Vang Pao, who is the field commander. Command control of [Hmong] operations is exercised by the Chief CIA Vientiane with the advice of Chief MAAG Laos. The same CIA paramilitary and US military teamwork is in existence for advisory activities (9 CIA operations officers, 9 LTAG/Army Special Forces personnel [White Star], in addition to the 99 Thai PARU under CIA control) and aerial resupply (Gravel 1971: 646).

In December 1961 the CIA started turning over control of the Momentum network to the Hmong, an undertaking which was to be managed by Hmong Special Operations Teams (SOT), twelve-man units trained in Thailand and modeled after the Thai PARU which were deployed to forward sites. By early 1962 Project Momentum expanded into Sam Neua Province, and at the same time a new paramilitary formation, the Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) was created. The SGUs were designed to serve as enhanced ADCs for unconventional offensive-type operations (Conboy 1995: 89).

### **Guerrilla Bases Established**

While direct US military intervention was still an option in early 1961, the CIA rushed to launch and implement Project Momentum in an effort to encircle the Plain of Jars with new guerrilla bases (Ahern 2006: 60). Dozens of guerrilla camps, some more or less permanent and others constructed only to support a particular operation, were to appear in succeeding years. Rudimentary airstrips, known as Lima Sites (LS), had been carved out of the mountaintops of

each command post to make them accessible, and drop zones (DZ) were cleared to receive airdrops of supplies carried out by CIA-owned Air America.<sup>51</sup>

Beginning in April 1961, White Star advisors attempted to recruit and train Hmong in the Kiou Kacham – Phou Chia area of Luang Prabang Province (located astride Route 13 which connected Vientiane and Luang Prabang). Shortly thereafter, according to Conboy the CIA (under pressure) agreed to allow White Star into Vang Pao's Pa Dong headquarters.<sup>52</sup> Conboy went on to say that "the incorporation of Special Forces advisors into Momentum was awkward and redundant... In effect, the Special Forces assumed the training role already being performed by Thai commandos" (Conboy 1995: 65). By the fall of 1961, White Star was operating from five Momentum locations,<sup>53</sup> the headquarters being Pha Khao (Conboy 1995: 88). In March 1962, White Star departed from three of their training camps and relocated to Sam Thong (Conboy 1995: 89), where they remained until their departure from Laos in October 1962 in accordance with the 1962 Geneva Agreement.

Concurrently, through April 1961 the CIA advisors, which numbered seven by the end of March, completed the formation of a loose ring around the Plain of Jars by established training posts at Pa Dong, Pha Kha, Ban Na, Phou Fa, Tha Lin Noi, San Tiau, Muang Ngat, and Houei Sa An, several of which were former GCMA bases (Conboy 1995: 62-64). The establishment of bases by White Star and the CIA could only have been accomplished with support from the network of clan leaders and elders, many of whom had ties with Touby during the GCMA days.

Of the nine zones<sup>54</sup> that surrounded the Plain of Jars, four were commanded by their traditional Hmong leaders who were fully loyal to Vang Pao. Since traditional leaders were not present at the other five zones, Vang Pao selected Hmong officers to command the irregulars in these locations. Nevertheless, the CIA was concerned that there might be insufficient alternative leadership to survive the loss of Vang Pao, whose presence was a "charismatic one-man show." By October 1961, Lair was confident that influential local leaders had been identified who might supplement or replace the outsiders (Ahern 2006: 101-102).

### **Mobilization Incentives**

Touby's first generation of recruits became the foundation for Vang Pao's army (Lee 2005: 331). Subsequently, paramilitary soldiers were usually recruited by a local leader who would assemble a group of men and submit a list to Vang Pao for approval. Once they were recruited, platoon leaders and squad leaders were usually picked by their political position or relationship to the chief and not by their leadership ability (Wing 1964: C104- C105). In addition

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<sup>51</sup> For detailed information about Lima Sites see Air America 1967-1973: 1-478.

<sup>52</sup> The pressure placed on the CIA may have been prompted by their Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco which took place in April 1961.

<sup>53</sup> The five locations were Pha Khao, the Sala Phou Khoun area, Muang Phun, Muang Oum, and Muang Moc (Conboy 1995: 88)

<sup>54</sup> Another source indicates there were ten sectors (Wing 1964: C30).

to benefits for their families, recruits received generous monetary compensation. While regular FAL soldier's monthly pay was 900 kip per month plus 30 kip per day allowance provided by his commander to pay for the soldiers' rations, Vang Pao's soldiers were paid 8,000 kip per month plus a 200 kip per day ration allowance while they were on operations (Sananikone 1984: 138-139).<sup>55</sup> There was also a schedule of bounties available to encourage contact with the enemy (Castle 1979: 60-61). Furthermore, of considerable importance was the supply of rice to their families.

According to FAL General Oudone Sananikone, Vang Pao's troops, which were part of the FAL, "received special treatment from the Americans because they operated in this strategic zone in the highlands along the North Vietnamese frontier." He went on to say that unbeknownst to the FAL, White Star teams organized and trained Hmong units outside the structure of the FAL using troops pulled from the FAL. Sananikone claims that although troops in the original FAL Hmong battalions were drawn down considerably, the FAL headquarters continued to pay the battalions according to their original strength reports. As a result, the Hmong irregulars were receiving double pay (Sananikone 1984: 77-78).

Asked how he avoided clan division while seeking to garner the support of different clans during his command of the CIA's secret army, Vang Pao said he did it by distributing bounties obtained from the Lao authorities to clan leaders. He then called upon these clan leaders to mobilize members within their own clans to support his cause. Elaborating on this point Vang Pao stated that "later, when I was in charge I tossed leadership titles to everyone. Whatever [title] they wanted, I would make recommendations to the king who would just sign [giving his seal of approval]. Whatever Hmong wanted they got so it was not hard [to maintain their loyalty] at all" (Lee 2005: 349).

In other words, Vang Pao's ability to obtain from the Lao king whatever titles these clan leaders desired was essential to securing and maintaining their loyalty. It was the king who legitimized these titles and the CIA who provided their salaries. The bottom line was that it could be said that it was the king of Laos and the CIA who "fashioned Vang Pao's legitimacy as a supreme Hmong leader from 1960-1975" (Lee 2015: 42).

To meet Vang Pao's needs to exploit his status as both military commander and political leader of a clan alliance, the departure from conventional funding and accounting procedures were required, and to this end a "slush fund indispensable to his tribal leadership was essential" (Ahern 2006: 101-102). Furthermore, Bill Lair provided a subsidy that enabled Vang Pao to provide financial relief to the needy which was essential to Vang Pao's ability to maintain and extend his authority (Ahern 2006: 179). From the beginning, it was recognized that support to Hmong civil society was essential to its survival.

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<sup>55</sup> The date paramilitary pay was at this level is unknown.

Nevertheless, Vang Pao's authority "rested on constant negotiation and mediation on things like clan politics, personal disputes, official misconduct, and petty trade. Like any governor dependent on the consent of the governed, Vang Pao made the necessary compromises...with important families to which he lacked close ties..." (Ahern 2006: 179).

### **Did the Hmong Seek Integration?**

It has been said that the "key to understanding the contemporary history of the [Hmong] in Southeast Asia is their love of independence and their desire to derive full benefits from their cash crop of opium. These two factors, rather than any ideological convictions, appear to determine in many instances whether the [Hmong] will fight for or against groups and established governments in Southeast Asia" (Schrock 1972: 227).

With this in mind, from the beginning one of Bill Lair's challenges was to avoid provoking RLG suspicion of US partisanship on behalf of the Hmong; furthermore, both Lair and Vang Pao were determined not only to avoid the appearance of supporting Hmong autonomy but to encourage and promote the tribe's assimilation into the Lao nation (Ahern 2006: 46). Vint Lawrence, who served as the CIA's liaison officer with General Vang Pao and was "his constant companion" for three years (1962-1965), pointed out that:

one of the things that I did constantly was to help, was to push Vang Pao into making his allegiance to the king absolutely clear and absolutely undeniable and he understood that. In fact, he understood that perhaps better than I did. But I supported him in that. Because if the king would, as he did historically, put the minority peoples under his wing it made it more difficult for the political factions in Vientiane to attack them. And so we tried very hard to keep any talk of political autonomy for the Hmong completely out of the question (Lawrence 1981).

A major challenge for the Hmong's mediator was "to balance Hmong aspirations to be free and the state's desire to extract goods and services as well as impose assimilation. When a conflict arises between these opposing objectives, the political broker faces a dilemma" (Lee 2015: 33).

From a social-economic point of view, integration of Hmong village economies into a progressive regional economy, which began in Xieng Khouang province after World War II and spread from there to other parts of the kingdom (Yang Dao 1993: 90), was a catalyst for social integration, the latter being enhanced by the extension of education opportunities (Yang Dao 1993: 97). Nevertheless, the challenge faced by the Hmong seeking to completely integrate into the Kingdom of Laos was the way in which the Lao elite viewed their own society (see Halpern 1964: 84-95). While the Hmong may have fought to preserve their traditional sense of national identity and out of resentment to previous Communist depredations, it is questionable about

whether their motivation arose from “a sense of ‘love of royalty’ or even clearly defined loyalty to the royal government generally” (Halpern 1994: 90).

In reality, it seems that all the Hmong wanted was equality with their Lao compatriots in a free, independent Laos. The unification under Vang Pao’s leadership of so many clans in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces offered an unparalleled opportunity to achieve this. But success depended on continued, direct American assistance; in effect, an American guarantee of Hmong social advancement. The Hmong position was summarized as follows: “Their only hope of an honorable existence in Laos is to remain a strong enough group so that any Laotian government will be forced to treat [Hmong] with respect” (Ahern 2006: 144).

To this end, it was proposed in April 1961 that newly recruited Hmong paramilitary forces would be integrated into the FAL. Not only would this establish the RLG’s future control of the Hmong, thereby dispelling the apprehensions of the RLG with respect to arming the Hmong, the supply of, and overt (as opposed to covert) relations with the Hmong forces would be legalized. Furthermore, this would enable the RLG to claim occupation and therefore control of large areas of Xieng Khouang Province (United States 1961b: 11-12).

In all likelihood Vang Pao, Touby, and the Americans anticipated that the recovery of the Plain by the FAL would be a short-term affair thereby enabling the Hmong villagers to return to their homes and resume their normal lives (Blaufarb 1977: 142; USAID 1961). In the meantime, they would support General Phoumi by harassing the enemy and diverting their attention from thwarting Phoumi’s campaign to recover the Plain of Jars. Most probably, none of the concerned parties envisioned this operation as the first year of a thirteen-year war between the Hmong and other tribal groups, and the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao (Blaufarb 1977: 143).

Ahern stated that “from the beginning, the [CIA] station had seen support to Hmong civil society as essential to the tribe’s survival,” and that “problems only indirectly connected with the war effort [came to be seen] as part of the same project: To preserve the Hmong way of life and to improve material conditions while encouraging political and economic integration into the Laotian polity”<sup>56</sup> (Ahern, 181).

Grant Evans correctly pointed out that “while social and cultural change among the Hmong accelerated...growing Hmong interaction with lowland Lao demanded adjustment on both sides, and it occurred slowly” (Evans 2002: 139).

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<sup>56</sup> In July 1964 Vang Pao and Chao Saykham (with assistance from Vint Lawrence), started the Union of Lao Races (ULR)—Lao Huam Lao—radio station that, with approval from the king, broadcasted in Lao, Hmong, and Lao Theung (Khmu), the most effective themes being the king as father of the Lao action and the unity of Laos. The radio station remained in operation until May 1975 (Shackley 2005: 42; Lyblong 2015: 147-148; Colonel Vang Geu email to author dated May 20, 2015).



## Cease-Fire and the 1962 Geneva Conference

Following the April 24, 1961 call for a conference and cease-fire, during the early stages of negotiations between the opposing factions on May 3, 1961 in Ban Namone (Dommen 2001: 443), the Pathet Lao agreed to a cease-fire. Nine days later the fourteen-nation “International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question” convened in Geneva and negotiations lingered on for a year until July 1962. The overarching US goal at Geneva was to establish a “neutral, politically independent Laos with a firm international guarantee against external aggression” (Rust 2014: 26).

On the other hand, it was observed that “strategic planning by the Pathet Lao was a ‘joint enterprise’ with party and Foreign Ministry leaders in Hanoi...The Vietnamese saw their effort in Laos as a part of the protracted struggle for liberation of the unified strategic area of Indochina” (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 81). The Pathet Lao sought an independent and neutral Laos without any international guarantees (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 82). In a sense, the Pathet Lao relationship with North Vietnam was ironic insofar as their desire was to eliminate foreign domination.

By May 1961, the basic structure of the Hmong guerrilla movement, headquartered in Pa Dong, was in place. There were numerous violations of the cease-fire during the course of the Geneva negotiations, and at some point in time following the cease-fire—which was not accompanied by a delineation of the boundaries controlled by the two sides—a decision was made jointly by the concerned parties to continue the resistance movement.

An emerging commitment to the Hmong became evident as early as on May 17 and 18 when a US Embassy delegation, including two USAID personnel and IVS’s Pop Buell, visited the Pa Dong area to investigate the needs of the Hmong refugees and the possibility of providing aid. Embassy political officer George Roberts reported that Vang Pao “spoke for the [Hmong], stating that they would certainly welcome what aid the United States could give them since the [Hmong] were now completely dependent on America for their continued existence” (Roberts 1961: 3; Dommen 2001: 439). They also learned about similar problems in other refugee centers around the Plain.

Roberts went on to say:

It was evident to me that the [Hmong] depended on the West, thoroughly detested the Communists, and needed our help. Without American support, they would have to flee or come to some sort of accommodation, but the loyal support they have given the West in resisting the advance of Communism in Southeast Asia clearly entitles them to a more favorable fate. Whether that fate can be found in Laos through fighting the Communists to a standstill at Ban Pa Dong, through re-establishing the

[Hmong] further from the Plaine des Jarres, or through such a drastic move as a transfer to Thailand, is not yet known (Roberts 1961: 7).

It became clear by late May 1961 that the Hmong had become the principal instrument of a continued RLG presence in northeastern Laos (Ahern 2006: 81). However, shortly thereafter on June 6 the cease-fire was violated by the Communists who overran Vang Pao's headquarters at Pa Dong. One week later on June 13, the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh attacked and captured Muang Ngat, one of the Hmong training bases located six miles from the North Vietnamese border (Dommen 2001: 444; Ahern 2006: 78). The Communist's aim may have been to strengthen their hand by converting "the cease-fire into a test of intent, and exerted pressure to speed up political negotiations" (Marek 1973: 139). In so doing, it has been reported that the Hanoi-backed Pathet Lao had a need to "wipe out enemy nests in the rear of the liberated areas" (Thee 1973: 131).

With the fall of Pa Dong, once again thousands of refugees were displaced, many of whom retreated (with the irregulars) to Pha Khao.<sup>57</sup> Faced with a new dilemma, the primary objective of the Hmong leaders was to convince their followers that with continued assistance from the Americans and Thai their original homes could be re-secured and held.

Up until the loss of Pa Dong there were no tactical units above company level under Vang Pao's command<sup>58</sup> and steps were taken to organize the Hmong companies into GM-B, an unofficial regiment comprised of units in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua (Sananikone 1984: 101; Conboy 1995: 95). The Xieng Khouang area was subdivided into ten sectors under the responsibility of GM-B (Wing 1964: C30). As of July 1962 there was a combined total of 170 units of Momentum's paramilitary and FAR's ADC in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua which, in 1965, were incorporated into Vang Pao's GM-B and formed its core guerrilla force (Conboy 1989: 13).

Going forward from mid-1961, operations in Xieng Khouang consisted almost entirely of guerrilla actions by Hmong teams against the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces. As Thomas Ahern pointed out, the Hmong "were now also a [US] client whose dependence on continued US support constituted the single greatest impediment to a settlement at Geneva" (Ahern 2006: 81).

### **America's Policy Dilemma**

It could be argued that a key interest in the Geneva negotiations was to preserve Vang Pao's paramilitary units (Prados 2010). However, to the extent that the dependence of the

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<sup>57</sup> One year later, on April 20, 1962, Pop Buell wrote: "About 10:30 Col. Vang Pao and myself left for Pha Khao (LS-14). It is hard to believe, less than 10 months ago I was the first American in here. All there was the old Pha Khao village, which consisted of about 20 houses. Now we have some 800 houses and over 7,000 people" (Buell 1962: 84).

<sup>58</sup> Since 1959, the military commander of Military Region 2 (Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces), to whom Vang Pao reported, was General Khamkhong Bouddavong (his predecessor was Major Sang Kittirath). General Vang Pao replaced Khamkhong as MR 2 commander on February 28, 1965 (Conboy 1995: 14, 19, 125).

Hmong on continued US support became a significant impediment to a Geneva settlement, some State Department personnel began to regret the American commitment to the Hmong, but as a whole the Department accepted that the US had both the “moral obligation and practical need” to protect the Hmong with material support and diplomatic efforts on their behalf at Geneva (Ahern 1977: 81). On May 9, 1961, the Acting Secretary of State noted in a message to Ambassador Winthrop Brown that “the US would seek to have the Geneva Conference provide for the protection of Laotian minorities, including the [Hmong]” (United States 1961b: 83).

The military option retained by the US, albeit one which was preferably not through direct intervention, was to continue supporting the resistance movement if the negotiating terms of the Geneva Conference were deemed unacceptable (Blaufarb 1967: 145; FRUS 1994, June 28, 1961: Doc. 125; FRUS 1997, August 10, 1961: Doc. 194). Whatever was to be done on the ground in Laos would have to be done by surrogates, even though the superiority of the North Vietnamese army would always outweigh the military capacity of the surrogates (Ahern 2006: 90; Blaufarb 1977: 147).

One of the conditions of the cease-fire was to halt any further supply of armaments. To this end, the CIA indicated as an option that “the [Hmong] could be instructed under this contingency to make a show of disarming and being pacified. The actual arms that they would turn in, however, should be only a small percentage of their total armaments, as they would probably still be under attack” (CIA Project Paper: 3).

Under these circumstances, in a Project Paper the CIA stated that the US should argue that armed actions by the Hmong would be defensive in nature (CIA Project Paper: 3). It is believed the Project Paper was written by the CIA’s station chief in Vientiane, Charles S. Whitehurst (Prados 2010: 331), who stated in the heavily redacted document that “if the [Hmong] are to be aided in their own self-defense, the United States Government must commit full support of the [Hmong] position at Geneva...and [the] resupply of [Hmong] units and their families... The alternative is the abandonment of an entire nation of individuals to bear the full fury of Communist suppression” (CIA Project Paper: 4).

In retrospect, Douglas S. Blaufarb, surmised that:

the foresight which might have suggested that, regardless of the extent of US aid, [Hmong] forces could not be equalized with those of North Vietnam did not exist. Also lacking was an appreciation of the importance attached by the Vietnamese to keeping Xieng Khouang province out of the hands of a powerful enemy. Seeing the [Hmong] as surrogates for the US, they appear—judging by their actions over the next ten years—to have concluded that it was a matter of vital national importance to defeat the [Hmong] resistance. No other reasoning justifies the price they eventually

paid to seize and hold the depopulated Plain of Jars and the hills around it (Blaufarb 1977: 147).

### Contingency Plans

During this period of policy dilemma, the Communists accelerated their military pressure. To the CIA it seemed that the North Vietnamese could and would eventually “eliminate organized armed [Hmong]...although at great cost” (Ahern 2006: 83). Bill Lair had pointed out that “the [Hmong] would fight well in small-scale actions...but if the [Vietnamese] kept on pushing them, they would probably lose, whether the Americans helped them or not” (Dommen 2001: 432). Indeed, it was said that “Touby had urged Vang Pao to maintain small guerrilla units and not engage the much larger North Vietnamese army in a conventional war that would place the Hmong at a disadvantage (Lee 2015: 308).

Accordingly, the US ambassador foresaw an eventual Hmong migration as perhaps the only escape from extermination, and several options were reviewed within Laos—one of which was to resettle Hmong to highland areas of South Laos on the Vietnam border (FRUS 1994, October 14, 1961: Doc. 166)—and in Sayaboury Province, as well as in neighboring Thailand (Ahern 2006: 83-84; United States 1962a: 153; Dommen 2001: 432). The CIA’s position, however, was that such an evacuation would “hurt Hmong morale, and unless confronted with the immediate threat of being overrun, the tribesmen would surely look at migration with a ‘very jaundiced eye’” (Ahern 2006: 84).

As early as July 1961, Brigadier General Edward Lansdale, the Pentagon’s expert on guerrilla warfare, observed that “[Hmong] village[s] are over-run by Communist forces and as men leave foodraising duties to serve as guerillas, a problem is growing over the care and feeding of non-combat [Hmong]. CIA has to be given some rice and clothing to relieve this problem. Consideration needs to be given to organized relief...” (Gravel 1977: 646). In this regard, one of the options considered, but not pursued, was the “internationalizing of this aid program by requesting the League of Red Cross Societies to undertake it” (Department of State 1961).

In mid-August 1961 the US Country Team<sup>59</sup> in Laos submitted its recommendations for future Hmong operations under five possible conditions (United States 1962a: 126-127). The bottom line was that in the worst case scenario “the US should continue whatever assistance was necessary for the evacuation of those [Hmong] who wished to leave Laos,” with another alternative being to “support the [Hmong] in their present locations or to resettle them in southern Laos.” However, the US delegation at Geneva warned that “the US should be

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<sup>59</sup> Coordinated by the US ambassador, Country Team members included the chiefs of USAID, USIS (United States Information Service), CIA, PEO/MAAG, and the Military Attaché.

careful...[and] that by maintaining the military organization of the [Hmong] it did not endanger long-range US interests in a stable, genuinely neutral Laos” (United States 1962a: 127).

Shortly thereafter, during an August 29, 1961 White House meeting, President Kennedy enquired what would happen to the Hmong in the event of a peaceful settlement and Ambassador at Large W. Averell Harriman responded that “the stronger the [Hmong] are the better able they are to harass the Communists, the better off we shall be.” Kennedy proceeded to give the green light to equip an addition 2,000 Hmong, thereby bringing the total to 11,000 Hmong paramilitary recruits (FRUS 1994, August 29, 1961: Docs. 171 and 172).

Although there were indications that frictions existed between Neutralist Kong Le and the Pathet Lao (FRUS 1994, June 28, 1961: Doc. 125),<sup>60</sup> in September Neutralist Souvanna Phouma asked Ambassador Brown to “urge Vientiane to cease rousing [Hmong] against Lao, to moderate [Hmong] guerrilla action, and to stop parachuting men behind his lines. While Souvanna had no objection to [the] airdrop of supplies” (FRUS 1994, September 18, 1961: Document 184; Brown and Zasloff 1986: 88-89), Brown assured him that it was desirable to hold down minor clashes so they didn’t erupt into major ones. In compliance, CIA operations officer Vint Lawrence pointed out that “it was very clear that our role to those of us who were running that operation had to be one which never allowed the Hmong to get into an untenable political or military position” (Lawrence 1981).

Nevertheless, the Hmong dilemma lingered, and a paper was presented on the lines of action that the US administration might take if the decision is made to support a Souvanna Phouma Neutralist government:

The primary objective of our policy toward a Souvanna Phouma Laos is to prevent Laos from being used as a base for Communist infiltration and subversion against Thailand and South Viet-Nam. Our secondary objective is to prevent Laos from becoming too easy a passageway for Communist infiltration and guerrilla movement from North Viet-Nam into South Viet-Nam. The first of these can probably be achieved if we can succeed in preserving the non-Communist character of a formally neutral Laos. The second will depend in large part upon the settlement at Geneva...

We are faced with the problem of the disposition of the [Hmong] whom we have armed and who are the most effective anti-Communist fighters in Laos. [Neutralist] Souvanna Phouma has indicated that he wishes to

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<sup>60</sup> By late 1962, the Pathet Lao were making an effort to split the Neutralists and create a dissident “Patriotic Neutralist” faction under the leadership of Kong Le’s turncoat Lieutenant (later Colonel) Deuan Sounnalath. The Americans began providing supplies to Kong Le at the request of Souvanna Phouma after they were shortchanged by the Pathet Lao. By early 1963, discreet contact was established between Kong Le and Vang Pao (Dommen 2001: 488, 490).

eliminate them as an armed force and no doubt he wishes to punish them as well. We have the choice of: a. Abandoning them. This would be a hard decision to take not only because of our moral commitment to them but also because of their effectiveness as fighters and their possible future utility. b. Shifting them to other areas where they would not be a threat to Souvanna Phouma and his government but might be useful against Pathet Lao concentrations or in harassing Viet Minh movements. This would be physically difficult to accomplish and would imply a *modus vivendi* with Souvanna Phouma which might be hard to work out (FRUS 1997, October 25, 1961: Document 232).

In February 1962, Ambassador Brown proposed that “our relief and refugee operations continue (most of [the USAID] personnel<sup>61</sup> are now busy in this field) and that we continue to supply airlift for food to FAR, particularly ADCs in isolated areas, including [Hmong], not only for humanitarian reasons and because of our moral obligation to these loyal supporters, but because it will provide us with a basis upon which [General] Phoumi might permit continuance of some American airlift which we would then have available for use of American personnel if necessary” (FRUS 1997, February 25, 1962: Note 1219).

While basic support for the Hmong continued during the course of the Geneva Convention, as neutralization approached recruiting was terminated, ammunition stockpiles were reduced, and most American advisors were withdrawn. Indeed, the United States took steps to close down Momentum insofar as no weapons were issued to the Hmong beginning June 27, and ammunition drops were suspended on July 21. By the time the Geneva Accords went into effect, the Hmong were left with short-term defense capabilities (Blaufarb 1977: 147; Conboy 1995: 90).

### **Outcomes of the 1962 Geneva Conference**

The outcome of the Geneva Conference on July 23, 1962 was the “Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos” which called for the formation of the second coalition government, and shortly thereafter a tripartite government was formed representing the Pathet Lao, the Neutralists, and the Rightists, with Neutralist Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. One of the key elements specified by the Accords was the “withdrawal from Laos of all foreign troops and military personnel” by October 7 (Rust 2014: 254).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> As noted earlier, many of USAID’s refugee relief field personnel were former IVS/Laos and Peace Corps volunteers (the latter with experience in other Southeast Asian countries) who spoke Lao, were sensitive to the cultural environments in which they worked, accepted operational risks, and were dedicated to their mission (Benson 2015: 40).

<sup>62</sup> It was estimated that North Vietnam withdrew only a small fraction of its estimated 6,000-9,000 troops in Laos. All but two of the CIA officers, Vint Lawrence and Tony Poe, and 100 Thai PARU personnel, all of whom were engaged in training and supporting the Hmong, were withdrawn to Thailand (Rust 2012: 265; Warner 1995: 85).

William Rust wrote that while “the 1962 Geneva declaration helped avoid a direct superpower confrontation over Laos, the kingdom that emerged from the conference was far less stable than the wobbly state shaped by the 1954 accords. When the earlier agreement was signed, the Pathet Lao was a small, weak presence confined to two northern provinces. In 1962, it controlled about one-half the country, including the border area with Vietnam” (Rust 2012: 265).

On October 5, two days before the Geneva Accords were to take effect, Harriman said during a conversation with the Deputy Director of the United States Information Agency that:

the press have blown this up, and also the CIA and the Pentagon—that this is a great event: October 7... They are going to make a lot of accusations we cannot prove wrong and we are going to make a lot of accusations we can't prove right... Point is, we haven't got any combat troops there... There's been a lot of good news—we've been asked [by the RLG] to continue to supply Phoumi, to supply the [Hmong]... But the point is we don't want to blow up domestically that October 7 is something of importance... The conflict is political now—not military. What I have said privately is ‘It's going just about as badly as I expected but with some better news than I expected’ (FRUS, October 5, 1962: Document 427).

Concerns arose regarding the future of the Hmong resistance. On the one hand, it could be argued that continued US support would be advisable in the event the neutralization effort failed. On the other, the proposed terms of the Geneva Accords made it difficult for the US to continue support for the resistance. As the various obstacles to neutralization were overcome, some at the policy level questioned the wisdom of ever having undertaken such a far-reaching commitment and one that was so difficult to dissolve. It was a critical moment for the resistance and a time when a decision to extricate the US was probably considered (Blaufarb 1977: 146).

At the same time, this was a period of intense administration interest in guerrilla warfare. The CIA's Cold War global military strategy was based on the Office of Strategic Service's (OSS, CIA's predecessor) support of partisan warfare strategy during World War II, which centered on small, mobile units designed to operate in enemy-held territory, in challenging Communist control and organizing civilian resistance. Furthermore, withdrawal of support would effectively mean abandoning people to Communist rule (Ahern 2006: 5; Blaufarb 1977: 145).

Roger Hilsman, a former OSS jungle warfare officer in Burma during World War II and a Kennedy foreign policy advisor, wrote some years later that “arming the tribesmen engineered an obligation not only to feed them when they were driven from their traditional homeland, but also to protect them from vengeance. This was an obligation...that might come to be a hindrance to implementing the Geneva Accords and achieving a truly neutral Laos” (Hilsman 1967: 115).

Aware of the potential consequences of the Accords, when Vang Pao met with clan elders on the usual egalitarian basis which prevailed during such gatherings one of the senior

leaders questioned the wisdom of accepting people who had long been enemies. He said that joining the Communists in a coalition “was like going to bed with a tiger... everyone would have to stay awake all night.” The Hmong were accustomed to life at the mercy of external forces, and the leaders recognized the paucity of choices. They voted to stick with Vang Pao and substitute intelligence collection and harassment forays for aggressive military activity (Ahern 2006: 126).

### **Airdrop Supply Issues**

The day before a July 28, 1962 meeting in Washington with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who travelled there following the Geneva agreement, Ambassador Harriman recommended the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency to:

discuss frankly with Souvanna, but not reveal our first alternative to hold [Hmong] intact with arms hidden. Harriman stated that [Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong] considers [Hmong] armed bandits; Right Wing considers them minority tribe that needs help and loyal to Souvanna and the King and therefore should be considered an asset to the new government. We should discuss with Souvanna [the] logistic problem of feeding the [Hmong] as [the] use of planes would be criticized by [Souphanouvong]. However supply of food [is] essential and can only be done by air (FRUS July 27, 1962: Document 412).<sup>63</sup>

Accordingly, during the course of the meeting both Harriman and the Director of Central Intelligence:

urged the importance of the [Hmong] to Souvanna and admitted [their] feeling of responsibility toward them. [They] urged that Souvanna make a public declaration of confidence in the [Hmong]... Souvanna agreed to the continued air supply and was not concerned by possible [Pathet Lao] static. He would establish mixed inspection teams to insure no arms or ammunition went on the air drops... He would take up the [Hmong] question immediately on his return but was prone to view it from a long term viewpoint of their resettlement in the Plains rather than in terms of the immediate problem. He was unworried about the Meo problem because Touby, the Chief of the [Hmong], was loyal to him, indeed had been brought up by him<sup>64</sup> (FRUS 1994, July 28, 1962: Doc. 415).

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<sup>63</sup> The logistics issue is reviewed in some detail in Dommen 2001: 485-486; Leary 1999; Department of State, September 29, 1962: Vientiane 508; Department of State, September 30, 1962: NIACT 378; Department of State, October 1, 1962: Vientiane 521; Department of State, October 3, 1962: Vientiane 530; Department of State, October 5, 1962: Vientiane 541.

<sup>64</sup> According to Touby, he stayed at Souvanna Phouma's house for three months when he was a student at Lycee Pavie (Lyfoung 1996: 85).



As early as August 1962, the Pathet Lao protested Air America flights to sustain the Hmong refugees and soldiers in RLG-controlled territory claimed by the Pathet Lao, an issue that Geneva had failed to address by not delineating territorial boundaries (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 88-89).

During an August 28 meeting in the Cabinet Room, President Kennedy asked what was being done to supply the [Hmong], and “Mr. Harriman responded that we had an agreement with Souvanna that permitted us to get food supplies to the [Hmong]. [1-1/2 lines redacted] They indicated that there were still US advisers with the [Hmong], and that their presence would not constitute violation of the Geneva Accords until after October 6.” The President went on to ask “whether we had more requests for arms and whether we should accede to them if the other side were not in fact withdrawing their troops. Secretary Rusk thought that if we get no assurance from Souvanna of a genuine cut-off of help from the North, we should reserve freedom of action for ourselves” (FRUS, August 29, 1962: Document 422).

Of particular concern was the ability of the US to continue critical airdrops to the Hmong people scattered over a widespread area of outposts and refugee centers. “Having failed to ‘mop up’ right-wing [Hmong] guerrilla units, [the Pathet Lao] apparently [hoped] to compel these forces to disband by choking off their supplies” (Central Intelligence Bulletin 1962, October 2, 1962). The Communists hoped to accomplish this by insisting that the US-chartered air supply flights to the Hmong must cease by October 7.<sup>65</sup>

### **Long Tieng, Sam Thong, and Refugee Relief**

In August 1962 Vang Pao and the CIA selected Long Tieng, a “pristine and absolutely beautiful” (Lawrence 1981) mountain valley, as a more suitable headquarters and would remain there until 1975 (Wing et al. 1964: D35; Conboy 1995: 90–91; Ahern 2006: 88–89). Shortly thereafter in October 1962 neighboring Sam Thong (a former White Star base) became the headquarters for USAID’s northeastern Laos refugee relief and related programs (Conboy 1995: 90-91; Benson 2015: 34). As of October 1962, 140,000 refugees and military families (many of them Hmong) were being supported with rice requirements totaling forty tons per day delivered mainly by airdrops (USAID 1962b: 1-4).

On October 1, Souvanna Phouma wrote a letter to US Ambassador Unger requesting him to continue aid to the Hmong because of concerns that if it was not done the Hmong would conclude that the government was ineffective and might turn against it. In an earlier letter, Souvanna told the ambassador that the delivery of food and medicine to refugees should be

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<sup>65</sup> The Communists’ point of view can be reviewed in a section entitled “The Meo Clandestine Army” that was written by Thee 1973: 307-312. Marek Thee was Poland’s delegate to the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICC) in Laos and had close contacts with the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. Information about ICC can be found in Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 57.

carried out under the RLG's administration and that the Americans should make it clear to the Hmong and other minorities that their loyalty was to the government (Dommen 2001: 485).

Under a new formal agreement with the Lao Ministry of Social Welfare, beginning October 7, 1962, USAID embarked on a mission to provide assistance to refugees—many of whom were dependents of Hmong military—as long as there was a need (Benson 2015: 36-37). They could not have realized that in the years to come attempts to seek peace would be shattered and there would be seasonal increases in the refugee population in northern Laos and an inexorable displacement of population gradually retreating through the mountains toward RLG-controlled areas along the country's vital artery, the Mekong valley.

### **Vang Pao's Concerns**

During the period after the Geneva Agreement took effect in October 1962 Americans restricted material support for the Hmong, and Vang Pao duly bombarded their passivity in the face of Neutralist and Communist violations. However, for Vang Pao the critical issue was that:

his objection to a perceived American emphasis on support to [Neutralist Prime Minister] Souvanna [Phouma] at the expense of the Hmong rested on two political calculations, the first having to do with the tribe's place in Laotian society. Vang Pao insisted that all the Hmong wanted was equality with their Lao compatriots in a free, independent Laos. The unification under his leadership of so many clans in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces offered an unparalleled opportunity to achieve this. But success depended on continued, direct American assistance; in effect, an American guarantee of Hmong social advancement. [redacted] summarized the Hmong position: 'Their only hope of an honorable existence in Laos is to remain a strong enough group so that any Laotian government will be forced to treat [Hmong] with respect' (Ahern 2006: 144).

In reality, during this difficult period (and thereafter) Vang Pao was unable to unite all of the Hmong, especially those who lived outside Xieng Khouang Province who chose to keep their distance from both Vang Pao and the Pathet Lao, while others chose to support Faydang.<sup>66</sup> Deep clan divisions were also a factor.<sup>67</sup>

Vang Pao was also concerned about the impact reduced American support would have on his political standing with the Hmong people. Indeed, he carried out American support under his name (he also made it clear to everyone that he was a loyal agent of the Lao government and the

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<sup>66</sup> Paul Hillmer points out that "in piercing the mythology that often surrounds Vang Pao, one must be careful not to overreach... For those who try to accurately describe Vang Pao, striking a proper balance between hero worship and character assassination remains a daunting task" (Hillmer 2010: 78).

<sup>67</sup> Examples of complex clan relationships are exemplified in Lyblong 2015 and Benson 1971.

king), and he made full use of his ability to command American support as a means of strengthening his own appeal and his hold on his people (Blaufarb 1977: 153):

[Vang Pao] explicitly acknowledged that direct US aid had to continue if he was to ‘demonstrate to all [Hmong] that their only salvation’ was to follow him. Without him—and there was no one who could replace him—they would ‘break up into uncontrollable bands’ and their military position would dissolve. [Redacted] thought it essential to get more ammunition and spare parts, both to bolster Vang Pao’s standing with his troops and to meet genuine tactical needs. [Redacted] emphasized the strategic aspect in explaining Vang Pao’s low spirits: Vientiane might fear the extermination of the neutralists in a shootout with the communists, but Vang Pao had a different concern. If Kong Le tacitly ceded the Plain of Jars to the communists, they would consolidate their control, and the Hmong under Vang Pao would never recover this sacred ground (Ahern 2006: 144).

By November Souvanna’s fragile coalition began to disintegrate when the Pathet Lao began to take action to weaken Kong Le’s Neutralist forces. However, during the early stages of the conflict the CIA cautioned Vang Pao that he should do no more than “encourage friendly contact” with Kong Le promoting the line that all were working for a neutral, independent Laos. CIA Station Chief Whitehurst wanted Vang Pao to avoid any suggestion of support for the Neutralists in open conflict with the communists (Ahern 2006: 141-142).

Vang Pao did take note of the fact that American support had a positive impact insofar as the Hmong were stronger and more united than ever before. At the same time, Thomas Ahern stated that “Vang Pao had been warned that a political settlement would mean changes, including a return to greater agricultural self-sufficiency. But the US Mission was ‘still running [a] large airlift of food to [the Hmong] who, as far as [redacted] concerned, have not really adjusted to [the] fact that we cannot keep shoving tons of rice out of airplanes indefinitely’” (Ahern 2006: 144).

## **Conclusion**

During the course of an era of hope, uncertainty, and ultimately despair, the tortuous road of retreat from the Hmong political center of Nong Het to their new Long Tieng headquarters was a long and treacherous one. At the end of the day, the Hmong inter-clan leaders, in search for autonomy and political recognition, were to pay heavy prices for making commitments to both the French and the Americans, although trade-offs were mutually beneficial in some respects. Unbeknownst to all concerned parties at the time, the stage was being set for greater political and military complexities and challenges that were yet to come as the Geneva Agreements unraveled and the war escalated (Benson 2014).

Thomas Ahern argued that “at the beginning of 1963, continued American support of the Hmong resistance...reflected as much a sense of obligation to loyal clients as it did a conviction of their military or political value” (Ahern 2006: 147). However, Michael Forrestal from the White House and Roger Hilsman from State visited Laos from January 9-14, 1963 and observed that “the [Hmong] remain one of the most difficult residual problems we face in Laos. Even if we could assure support for them in the future, the question would remain whether such support is worth their value as a source of intelligence or their value as a military asset in the event of a breakdown of the Geneva Accords. It is becoming evident that our capability to supply the [Hmong] is being increasingly jeopardized.”

They went on to inquire into the “extent of our moral obligation to these people, is it enough to set them on the path to self-sufficiency, or are we required to help them withdraw to military secure zones?” In the event, would it be in the best interest of the Hmong from a survival standpoint to relocate them in some areas around the Plain? They concluded that “if the situation in Laos is to remain...in an uneasy balance, a constant counteroffensive will have to be waged by Ambassador [Leonard] Unger and his country team” (FRUS 1994, Undated, ca. January 1963: Document 440).

The first clear and unmistakable violation of Geneva’s cease-fire on a large scale took place in April 1963. The Pathet Lao, with the support of North Vietnam, turned on Neutralist Kong Le and overran the Plain, and in response, with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma’s knowledge, high level decisions were made in Washington on April 10 by President Kennedy that permitted limited expansion of the Hmong guerrillas in support of Kong Le (Benson 2014: 232-233; Conboy 1995: 99). By late summer, Vang Pao took steps to reactivate ADC units located across Sam Neua Province; furthermore, FAR began to mobilize battalions in Sam Neua (Conboy 1995: 100). It can be said that this marked the beginning of the so-called “Secret War,” so named because “all sides preferred to pretend that the 1962 Geneva Protocol remained in force, pristine, and unsullied”<sup>68</sup> (Prados 2010: 327).

In retrospect, Douglas Blaufarb viewed American involvement in the conflict from beginning to end as being a largely “unplanned and improvised” undertaking “which changed character several times from a limited and provisional action related to internal Lao affairs to an open-ended campaign tied to the US’s general objectives in Indochina” (Blaufarb 1977: 166-167).

At the same time, the Hmong resistance may be seen as a popular counterinsurgency movement which, in the context of a war of large dimensions, could not prevail against its enemies without greater help than their patron, the United States, was prepared to offer (Blaufarb 1977: 167-168). What was the ultimate objective of the Hmong people? Vint Lawrence, who

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<sup>68</sup> As Grant Evans noted, “the spotlight of critical commentary has fallen on the so-called American ‘secret army,’ mainly because more information is available” (Evans 2002: 143).

served as General Vang Pao's CIA case officer for three years, reminisced about conversations during the frequent gatherings of Vang Pao and all the local leaders:

Again long, long talks, memories of old times, memories of the times up on the plateau of Xieng Khouang where they all wished to return. An incredibly fierce desire to go back to the farms that they had and dreaming of the day—knowing probably full well that day would never come—of what their life had been like. And today it happens the same. I mean today talk to these people and they still are dreaming about that place they left. So there was a lot of memory talk, where their spirits were, where they had grown up, where they wanted to return to” (Lawrence 1981).

Likewise, Touby Lyfoung hoped that “if one day the country will [be] at peace again...I will take all my children to develop and rebuild once more my father's villages of Nam Kuang and Phak Khe [in the Nong Het area] and on that day how happy and proud will I feel?” (Lyfoung 1996: 185)

Years after the war ended in 1975, Nhiavu Lobliayao, Faydang's half-brother and a Communist party member, confided shortly before his death in Nong Het in 1999 that “we all, the left and the right, have made mistakes and many people have lost their lives from these mistakes. No one really wins, everyone suffers from the war” (Say Khao 2005).

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