

**Political Transmigrants:  
Rethinking Hmong Political Activism in America**

**By**

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**Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 12, 46 pages**

**Abstract**

Since the initial resettlement of the Hmong in the United States in the mid-1970s, they have maintained strong political and military relationships with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Yet, there is little research on that relationship and the involvement of the Hmong in the United States in political developments in Laos. Most works on Hmong political activism have focused on the electoral participation and representation of Hmong Americans in relation to American domestic politics. In this article, using archival, ethnographic, and interview data that I have collected between 2006 and 2009 in Laos, Thailand, and the United States, I describe and analyze the non-domestic or transnational form of Hmong American political expression and participation. I argue that Hmong political activism in America not only was transnational from the outset, but that their transnational involvement in political developments in Laos and their relations with the Lao PDR government also had a significant impact on their ethnic politics. Many Hmong political activists made their entry into ethnic politics through the door of transnational politics, and many were motivated by transnational political issues to participate in domestic American politics. By exploring their transnational involvement in political developments in Laos and their relations with the Lao PDR government, we get a more complete and dynamic understanding of Hmong political activism in the United States than is possible by focusing exclusively on domestic and electoral participation. Examining their transnational politics also allows us to see the transnationality of not only their culture, identity, and community but also that of their political activities and aspirations.

**Keywords:** Hmong, politics, transnationalism, transmigrants, Cold War, terrorism

## Introduction

On the morning of Monday, June 4, 2007, agents of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) raided the homes of nine men in California, including Vang Pao, Lo Chao Thao, Lo Thao, Youa True Vang, Hue Vang, Chong Yang Thao, Seng Vue, Chue Lo, and former U.S. Army Lt. Col. Harrison Ulrich Jack. The federal criminal complaint, known as *USA vs. Harrison U. Jack, et al.*, alleged that these men participated in a plot to purchase weapons, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, AK-47 machine guns, C-4 explosives, Claymore land mines, night-vision goggles, and other arms and munitions, in order to supply them to insurgents in Laos to conduct military operations against the government of Laos. Their plot included attacking Vientiane, Laos' capital, and making it look something like the results of the attack upon the World Trade Center in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> Later, four additional men, including Nhia Kao Vang, David Vang, Thomas Yang and Jerry Yang, were also arrested and charged. Of the defendants, Vang Pao was easily the most famous. He was the Hmong former general of the Royal Lao Army (RLA) from northern Laos who had fought Lao and Vietnamese communists with American support in the 1960s and early 1970s. The case, consequently, was largely popularized as Vang Pao's arrest in Hmong communities throughout the diaspora and international media although there were also other defendants. For this alleged plot, all the defendants faced possible life prison sentences if convicted.<sup>2</sup>

On September 19, 2009, after two years of legal maneuvering in court and sustained protests by Vang Pao supporters outside the Sacramento district court, federal prosecutors dropped all charges against Vang Pao, declaring that they did not have sufficient reliable evidence to prosecute the Hmong leader.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United States District Court Eastern District of California Criminal Complain, *United States of America v. Harrison Ulrich Jack; General Vang Pao; Lo Cha Thao; Lo Thao; Youa True Vang; Hue Vang; Chong Yang Thao; Seng Vue; and Chue Lo*, Case No. 207-MJ-0178 (E.D. Cal. Filed June 4, 2007), (Sacramento, CA, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> United States District Court Eastern District of California, *United States of America v. Harrison Ulrich Jack; Lo Cha Thao; Lo Thao; Youa True Vang; Hue Vang; Chong Yang Thao; Seng Vue; Chue Lo; Nhia Kao Vang; David Vang; Jerry Yang; and Thomas Yang*, Case No. Case No. 2:07-CR-0266 FCD (Filed September 20, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Magagnini, "Hmong Express Relief Over End of Case for Vang," *Sacramento Bee*, 18 September 2009; Denny Walsh, "Feds Drop Charges Against Hmong Leader Vang Pao," *Sacramento Bee*, 18 September 2009; Eric Bailey and My-Thuan Tran, "Charges Against Californian Hmong Leader Accused of Plotting to Overthrow Lao Government Are Dropped," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 2009; Jesse McKinley, "U.S. Drops Case Against Exiled Hmong Leader," *New York Times*, 19 September 2009;

“In our measured judgment, and based on the totality of evidence in the case and the circumstances regarding defendant Vang Pao,” said U.S. Attorney Lawrence Brown, Special Agent in Charge of the San Francisco Field Division of the Bureau of ATF, “we believe that continued prosecution of this defendant is no longer warranted.”<sup>4</sup> On January 10, 2011, just four days after Vang Pao passed away in a Clovis hospital at the age of 81, the charges against the rest of Vang Pao’s twelve co-defendants were also dropped.<sup>5</sup>

From court documents and press releases, it is still unclear what the motivations for the arrests of Vang Pao and his associates were, whether their arrests were directed from the highest levels of the U.S. government, or whether the Hmong were intentionally targeted from the outset.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, their arrests were significant. First, it reminds us that the Secret War in Laos, in which Vang Pao helped recruit and organize, with the help of American military personnel, Hmong fighters into a secret guerrilla army to fight Communist forces has not entirely ceased even though the Second Indochina War (i.e., the Vietnam War) was officially declared over in 1975. Remnants of the Hmong secret army and Pathet Lao security forces have continued to engage in a low-level conflict in the Lao jungle which continues to this day.<sup>7</sup> Second, this arrest highlights the continued effects of the Secret War and the ongoing fighting in the Lao jungle on the identities and community development of the Hmong in the United States. Specifically, it shows that, despite their exodus and their continuing effort to cultivate strong ties with the U.S. government and make America their new home, Hmong refugees have maintained a strong albeit paradoxical relationship with the government of Laos. As such, they are engaging in what Linda G.

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Eric Bailey and My-Thuan Tran, “Federal Charges Dropped Against Hmong Leader Vang Pao,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 September 2009.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, “Superseding Indictment Handed Down in Plot to Overthrow the Government of Lao,” Press Release, 18 September 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Egelko, “U.S. drops charges in alleged Laotian coup plot,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, C-2, 11 January 2011.

<sup>6</sup> “Defense keys on federal agent's behavior in Laos plot case,” *Sacramento Bee*, September 26, 2009; Roger Warner, “On Exaggeration, Context and the Wages of A Covert War,” *Pioneer Press*, 20 June 2007; Roger Warner, “The Weirdest Terrorism Court Case in America,” *Huffington Post*, March 11, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Arnold, “Still A Secret War,” *Digital Journalist*, October 2006; Roger Arnold, “Update: Still A Secret War, Part II,” *The Digital Journalist*, August 2007; Thomas Fuller, “Old U.S. Allies, Still Hiding in Laos,” *New York Times*, 17 December 2007; Thomas Fuller, “CIA-Backed Soldiers Still on Run,” *New York Times*, 24 December 2007.

Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc have called transnationalism, which they defined as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,” and “a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries.”<sup>8</sup> More importantly, their arrests illustrate that the political worlds of Hmong Americans encompass much more than just their participation in domestic American mainstream politics. They show that Hmong Americans have also engaged in a type of politics that has transpired in America but carries implications beyond the geopolitical border of the United States and has involved intertwined relations with their Asian homeland. Simply put, it points to their participation in what Christian Collete and Pei-te Lien have properly called *transnational politics*.<sup>9</sup>

Transnational politics has been a salient and significant part of Hmong life, community development, and social organization in the United States from the outset. Yet, there has been a dearth of scholarly analysis of the transnational politics of Hmong Americans. Most studies on Hmong politics are on what can be called *ethnic politics*—that is, the participation of the Hmong in domestic American politics as an ethnic minority in the United States.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1980s, studies on Hmong politics largely focused on the Hmong traditional leadership structure, their kinship system, and the impact of immigration and resettlement on their leadership roles and structures. The same focus continued to appear in scholarship during the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> In the 2000s, there was a shift in focus in the literature, but

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 7 & 22.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Collet and Pei-te Lien, eds., *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Parenti, “Ethnic Politics and the Persistence of Ethnic Identification,” *American Political Science Review*, 60: 3 (Sept. 1967), 717-726; Dianne M. Pinderhughes, “Racial and Ethnic Politics in America,” *ISSR Working Papers in the Social Sciences*, 4:16 (1988-89): 1-11; Sheila L. Croucher, *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in A Postmodern World*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Cheu Thao, “Hmong Migration and Leadership in Laos and the United States,” in *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports*, eds. Bruce Downing and Douglas Olney, (Minneapolis: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1982), 99-121; Timothy Dunnigan, “Segmentary Kinship in an Urban Society,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 55:3 (1982): 126-136; Jeremy Hein, “From Migrants to Minority: Hmong Refugees and the Social Construction of Identity in the U.S.,” *Sociological Inquiry* 64: 3 (1994): 281-306; and Jeremy Hein, “Leadership Continuity and Change in Hmong American Community,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 6:2 (1997): 213-228.

most studies on Hmong politics remained largely focused on their participation in domestic American politics, particularly their struggle for political rights, their political behaviors, and their participation in electoral politics.<sup>12</sup> This shift in focus and the proliferation of scholarship on Hmong ethnic politics can be attributable to the visibility and successful election of Hmong American candidates to public office at the local and state level, especially in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California, and the long-standing emphasis on electoral politics in research dealing with American racial and immigrant groups by political scientists.

In ethnic politics, the political act transpires in the United States and does not transcend the American geopolitical border. The focus is not on the country of origin but on the country of settlement, and the goal is not to change the political condition in the country of origin or to mobilize all or a segment of the diasporic population to return home. It is to inspire the refugee or exiled population to integrate or assimilate into the country of settlement. Studies on Hmong ethnic politics have a domestic focus, and they aim largely at assessing the level of their assimilation into American society and at analyzing their relations with the United States. They explore the ways, conditions, and extent to which Hmong in the United States have participated in local, state, and federal electoral contests, or engaged in civic action through any of the institutions of U.S. civil society.

In contrast, in transnational politics, the political act transpires in the country of settlement but carries implications for and connects the participants to their country of origin. The goal can range from simply advocating on behalf of their co-ethnics in the country of origin to mobilizing the diasporic community to change the political conditions in the country of origin in order for the diasporic population to return “home” if they wish to do so, but the focus is primarily and unambiguously on the country of origin. In this sense, the participants in transnational politics are not merely immigrants; they are

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Victor M. Hwang, “The Hmong Campaign for Justice: A Practitioner’s Perspective,” *Asian Law Journal* 9: 83, (2002): 83-115; Taeko Yoshikawa, “From a Refugee Camp to the MN State Senate: A Case Study of a Hmong American Women’s Challenge,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 7 (2006): 1-23; Steven Doherty, “Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in Hmong-American Community,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 8 (2007): 1-35; and Yang Lor, “Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (2009): 1-53.

transmigrants.<sup>13</sup> Transmigrants, to borrow Nina G. Schiller and her colleagues' definition, are "immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state."<sup>14</sup> Transmigrants "take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states."<sup>15</sup> For Nina G. Schiller and George Fouron, "true transmigrants" have regular and sustained social contact over time with their home country.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, participants in transnational politics are *political transmigrants*. These, to borrow the words of Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and his colleagues, are "immigrants who become involved in their home country politics on a *regular* basis."<sup>17</sup>

Where Hmong transnationalism is explored, the focus is largely on the transnationality of Hmong culture, identity, and community through globalization, economic transactions, and media technologies.<sup>18</sup> Because of the marginalization of the political dimension of Hmong transnationalism, many questions are still unanswered. What is the nature of Hmong transnational politics? Why have Hmong Americans continued to engage in and express concerns for the political and military developments in their country of origin? Under what conditions and to what extent have the Hmong in the United States been able to

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<sup>13</sup> Alejandro Portes, "Toward A New World: The Origins and Effects of Transnational Activities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22: 2 (1999): 463-477.

<sup>14</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68:1 (Jan 1995): 48-63.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Basch, Nina G. Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Nina Glick Schiller and George E. Fouron. "Terrains of Blood and Nation: Haitian Transnational Social Fields," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22: 2, (1999): 340-366; Nina Glick Schiller and Georges E. Fouron. *George Woke Up Laughing: Long-distance Nationalism and the Search for Home*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Alejandro Portes, William Haller, "Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants," *American Journal of Sociology*, 108:6 (May 2003): 1211-1248.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Prasit Leeprecha, "Role of Media Technology in Reproducing Hmong Identity," in *Living in A Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion*, edited by Don McCaskill, P. Leeprecha, and He Shaoying, (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Mekong Press, 2008): 88-113; Louisa Schein, "Hmong/Miao Transnationality: Identity Beyond Culture," *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, eds. Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas, and Gary Y. Lee, (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004): 273-290; Louisa Schein, "Mapping Hmong Media in Diasporic Space," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 229-244; and Gary Yia Lee, "Dreaming Across the Oceans: Globalization and Cultural Reinvention in the Hmong Diaspora," *Hmong Studies Journal* 7, (2007): 1-33.

sustain their political engagement with Laos? What is the relationship between Hmong ethnic and transnational politics? How did their transnational politics influence their citizenship, identity, political behaviors, participation in domestic American politics, as well as American foreign relations?

In this article, I describe the transnational politics of Hmong transmigrants in the United States—an essential but little understood component of the Hmong’s new life in America. I argue that Hmong political activism in America not only was transnational from the outset, but that their transnational involvement in political developments in Laos and their relationship with the Lao PDR government also has had a significant impact on their ethnic politics. Many Hmong political activists made their entry into ethnic politics through the door of transnational politics, and many are motivated by transnational political issues to participate in domestic American politics. By exploring their transnational involvement in the political developments in Laos and their relations with the Lao PDR government, we get a more complete and dynamic understanding of their political activism in the United States than is possible by focusing exclusively on domestic and electoral participation. Their transnational politics also allow us to see the transnationality of not only their culture, identity, and community but also that of their political activities and aspirations.

### **Hmong Politics in China and Southeast Asia**

The Hmong had a very long and complex history of political engagement with more dominant and powerful peoples and governments in China and mainland Southeast Asia before immigrating to the United States, starting in the mid-1970s. The origin and early history of the Hmong is still obscure and under debate. Chinese annals placed a people known as the “Miao,” who may or may not be the Hmong, on the plains of the Yellow River in the third century B.C.E.<sup>19</sup> Today, virtually all Hmong say that their ancestors came from China, and many claim that the Hmong are the descendants of the Miao king named Chi You and the San Miao kingdom in ancient Chinese history. Others, however, question the veracity of this claim. For them, the Hmong and the Miao of past and present China are not necessarily the same people. “Miao” has carried different meanings over time, and it always encompassed multiple groups. At

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<sup>19</sup> William Geddes, *Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 3.

present, “Miao” still refers to four different groups in China, namely the Hmong, Hmu, A Hmao, and Qhao Xiong.<sup>20</sup>

In the early to mid-1800s, due largely to war, persecution and oppression under Han Chinese control, some half a million Hmong migrated south from China to the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma (today’s Myanmar).<sup>21</sup> The Hmong, according to Yang Dao, a Hmong scholar, arrived in Xieng Khoung province in northern Laos between 1810 and 1820.<sup>22</sup> By 1850, Hmong had established themselves in various settlements in the north. In the early 1970s, the Hmong in Houan Phan, Xieng Khoung, Luang Prabang, Luang Nam Tha and Sayaboury provinces totaled some 293,000 persons.<sup>23</sup> Except for a bloody clash with the Khmu over hegemony of the heights of the Xieng Khoung plateau at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Hmong in Laos led a relatively peaceful and autonomous life in the highlands in isolation from the lowlanders.<sup>24</sup>

Their autonomy ended when Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia came under French control in the late nineteenth century. For six decades, from 1893 when Laos became a French protectorate to 1954 when Laos gained its independence, the Hmong in Laos also became subjects of French colonialism. Placed at the bottom of the French colonial hierarchy, most Hmong lived in a condition historian Alfred McCoy

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<sup>20</sup> Nicolas Tapp, “The State of Hmong Studies (An Essay on Bibliography),” in *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, 18-20; Jacques Lemoine, “To Tell the Truth,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 9, (2008): 1-29; Gary Yia Lee, “Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 8 (2007), 1-31; Louisa Schein, “Hmong/Miao Transnationality: Identity Beyond Culture,” in *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, 273-290; Norma Diamond, “Defining Miao: Ming, Qing and Contemporary Views,” *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Steven Harrell, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 92-116.

<sup>21</sup> Christian Culas and Jean Michaud, “A Contribution to the Study of the Hmong (Miao) Migrations and History,” in *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, eds. Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas, and Gary Y. Lee, (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004), 61-86; Jean Mottin, *History of the Hmong (Meo)*, 43; and Ann Fadiman, *Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Yang Dao, “Why did the Hmong leave Laos?” in *The Hmong in the West*, ed. Bruce T. Downing and Douglas P. Olney, (Minneapolis, MN: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, 1982), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Gary Yia Lee, “Minority Policies and the Hmong,” in *Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Societies of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox, (London: University of Queensland Press, 1982), 199.

<sup>24</sup> Yang Dao, *The Hmong at the Turning Point*, (Minneapolis: Worldbridge Associates, Ltd., 1993), 36.



described as “little better than slavery.”<sup>25</sup> Forced to engage in unpaid *corvée* labor, the Hmong had to pay double, sometimes triple, taxes—one portion to French authorities who occupied the top echelon of the colonial society and another portion to the Lao and the Tai who, acting as intermediaries, did the actual collection of the taxes from the people below them like the Hmong.<sup>26</sup>

Grievances over unfair tax collection and unpaid *corvée* labor led to the bloody revolt, known as *La Guerre de Fou* (War of the Insane), carried out by Hmong messianic leader Pa Chai Vue and his followers against the French.<sup>27</sup> The revolt began in northwest Vietnam in 1918 and later spread to the Hong Het and Phonsavan districts near the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khoung province in northern Laos. Pa Chai, the son of a notable Hmong family from Na Ou village in the Muang Then (Dien Bien Phu) district, sought to establish an autonomous Hmong kingdom with land areas stretched from Dien Bien Phu, where the capital of the kingdom would be located, to Nong Het and Phonsavan districts in Xieng Khoung province in northern Laos.<sup>28</sup> The revolt ended in November 1921 when Pa Chai Vue was assassinated. Who actually captured and killed Pa Chai Vue, however, remains a historical mystery. Some believed that the Yao (or Khmu) were Pa Chai’s assassins while others alleged that his assassins were Hmong rebels who came to get his head for bounty from the French.<sup>29</sup> Father Yves Betrais, the French Catholic missionary who helped to create the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) for the Hmong in the early 1950s, recorded verbatim a version of the revolt from a Hmong man in Sayaboury, Laos, in 1972. In this account, Txooj Tsawb Yaj, the narrator, talked as if Pa Chai was never captured and killed; he did

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<sup>25</sup> Alfred McCoy, “French Colonialism in Laos, 1893-1954,” *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred M. McCoy, (New York, Harper and Row, 1970), 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-99; Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of A People*, (Cheney: Eastern Washington University, 1998), 17; Gary Yia Lee, “Ethnic Minorities and National Building in Laos: The Hmong in the Lao State,” *Peninsule* 11/12, (1985/1986): 215-232.

<sup>27</sup> Alfred McCoy, “French Colonialism in Laos, 1893-1954,” *Laos: War and Revolution*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> This revolt is the most prominent and widely studied anti-colonial struggle by the Hmong in French Indochina. See, for example, Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat: The Hmong and America’s Secret War in Laos*, (Spokane: Washington University Press, 2000), 31-42; Geoffrey Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 151-160; Geoffrey Gunn, “Shamans and Rebels: The Batchai (Meo) Rebellion of Northern Laos and North-West Vietnam (1918-1921),” *Journal of the Siam Society* 74, (1986): 114-117; Nicholas Tapp, “The Impact of Missionary Christianity Upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities: The Case of the Hmong,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20:1, (1989): 70-95; Alfred McCoy, “French Colonialism in Laos, 1893-1954,” 91-92.

<sup>29</sup> Mai Na Lee, “The Dream of the Hmong Kingdom: Resistance, Collaboration and Legitimacy Under French Colonialism,” (Ph. D diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 81.

not really die.<sup>30</sup> This emphasis, Mai Na Lee has suggested, was an effort “to demonstrate that the dream of the Hmong kingdom has merely gone latent.”<sup>31</sup>

To pacify the Hmong after the revolt, the French maneuvered to establish a system of *tasseng*, or administrative districts, in Nong Het, east of the Plain of Jars near the Lao-Vietnamese border, to allow the Hmong to govern their own people. As a gesture of gratitude for his help in mobilizing Hmong workers to construct Colonial Route 7 and to repress Hmong secessionist aspirations during *La Guerre de Fou*, French authorities appointed Lo Bliayao as the first chief of the Hmong in Nong Het.<sup>32</sup> Under the new system, the Hmong could express their grievances to a Hmong intermediary rather than an intermediary of a different ethnicity. The system, however, encouraged greed, extortion, competition and rivalry among the Hmong, pitting in particular the two most powerful clans in Nong Het, the Ly and the Lo, against each other for control over the Hmong and the wealth and power that accompanied the lucrative and coveted position. Their rivalry reached a new height during World War II with Touby Lyfoung aiding French commandos on one side and his maternal uncle, Faydang Lo, aiding the Japanese on the other. Their division continued to the Vietnam War with Faydang Lo joining the communist Pathet Lao and Touby Lyfoung throwing his support to the Americans.<sup>33</sup>

In the meantime, U.S. interests in Laos had led the Americans to seek out another Hmong leader, Vang Pao, who was once Touby Lyfoung’s protégé. From early 1961 when a 35-year-old CIA case officer to the Thai Police Aerial Recovery Unit (PARU) named James William “Bill” Lair met then Colonel Vang Pao of the Royal Lao Army in the mountains in Xieng Khoung province, northern Laos, to May 1975, Vang Pao helped organize a highly effective secret army to fight Lao and Vietnamese communists in Laos. At the height of the war in 1969, some 40,000 Hmong were serving in the secret army that Vang Pao had organized with the aid of American military personnel.<sup>34</sup> All in all, 60 percent of

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<sup>30</sup> Txooj Tsawb Yaj, *Rog Paj Cai*, recorded by Y. Betrais in Sayaboury (Laos), 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Mai Na Lee, “The Dream of the Hmong Kingdom,” 81.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-201.

<sup>33</sup> Yang Dao, *Hmong at the Turning Point*, 48-49; Chia Youyee Vang, “Hmong Anti-Communism at Home and Abroad,” *Anti-Communist Minorities in the U.S.: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees*, ed. Ieva Zake, (New York: Plagrove Macmilan, 2009), 212-213.

<sup>34</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,

the 300,000 Hmong in Laos fought with Vang Pao against the communist forces.<sup>35</sup> U.S. strategists regarded the Hmong outposts as “the single most important American program in Laos... [and]... a vital barrier to communist penetration of the Mekong valley.”<sup>36</sup>

For their support of U.S. interests in Laos, the Hmong suffered incredible loss. By one account, 25 percent of the Hmong who enlisted were killed.<sup>37</sup> Between 1963 and 1971, approximately 18,000-20,000 Hmong were killed in combat.<sup>38</sup> According to another estimate, 17,000 Hmong troops and 50,000 Hmong civilians died in the conflict.<sup>39</sup> By 1975, 30,000 Hmong, representing ten percent of the entire Hmong population of 300,000 in Laos, were dead.<sup>40</sup> Half of all males over the age of fifteen were killed.<sup>41</sup> In 1974, freelance journalist W.E. Garrett, who arrived in Laos in 1973 to collect information for his *National Geographic* magazine article, likened Hmong casualty to “a holocaust that wiped out 18,000,000 [Americans] and forced the remainder of the population to flee to Mexico.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite the sacrifices by the Hmong and the millions that the United States government spent on the secret war in Laos, the United States ultimately failed to achieve its mission in the region. By the early 1970s, the United States government had come under intense scrutiny and pressure from anti-war protesters and others in America to end the war.<sup>43</sup> On January 27, 1973, the United States signed a cease-

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1994), 32; Joseph Cerquone, *Refugees from Laos in Harm's Ways*, (Washington, D.C.: American Council for Nationality Services, 1986), 2; Brian W. Jacobs, “No Win Situation: The Plight of the Hmong – America’s Former Ally,” *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 16, no. 139, (1996): 140; John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 355.

<sup>35</sup> Marc Kaufman, “Allies Abandoned: The United States Enlisted the Hmong to Help Fight the Cold War. Now it is Shunning them during the Peace,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* 27 February 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Fred Branfman, “Presidential War in Laos,” *Laos: War and Revolution*, 252.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Stevenson, *End of Nowhere*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 198.

<sup>38</sup> W. Courtland Robinson, “Laotian Refugees in Thailand,” in *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, eds. Joseph J. Zasloff and Leonard Unger, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 220.

<sup>39</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 40; Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992.*, (Bloomington/Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 334.

<sup>40</sup> Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 110; John Duffy, *The Hmong: An Introduction to their History and Culture*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2004), 4; Tou Fu Vang, “The Hmong of Laos,” in *Introduction to Indochinese History, Culture, Language and Life*, ed. J. Whitmore, (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, U of Michigan, 1979), 93-192.

<sup>41</sup> Lillian Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>42</sup> W.E. Garrett, “No Place to Run: The Hmong of Laos,” *National Geographic* 145 (Jan. 1974): 83.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Wells, *The War with America’s Battle over Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1994).

fire agreement with North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Immediately, the United States began pulling American troops from the region. By the end of March, all American troops were pulled from South Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> In Laos, the United States made its final evacuation of American military personnel in Long Cheng on April 14, 1975. More than 10,000 Hmong flooded Long Cheng airbase, hoping to be airlifted to safety with the Americans.<sup>45</sup> According to Captain Jack Knotts, the Bird Air (and former Air America) helicopter who flew Vang Pao and Jerry Daniels (a CIA advisor) out of Long Cheng, “The evacuation was solely as a cover to get Vang Pao and Jerry safely out of Long Tieng [Cheng], and there was no intention of taking thousands and thousands of Hmong out of Laos.”<sup>46</sup> In the end, only 2,500 Hmong, most of whom were family members of General Vang Pao and other high-ranking Hmong military officers, were able to board U.S. aircraft to Thailand with Vang Pao and the Americans.<sup>47</sup> By the end of 1980, more than 100,000 Hmong had also followed Vang Pao into exile.<sup>48</sup> Most eventually resettled in the United States, where Vang Pao went, with smaller numbers resettling in France, Germany, French Guiana, Australia, Germany, and Argentina.<sup>49</sup>

### **Cold War Transnational Politics**

Despite their forced exodus from Laos, Hmong refugees maintained strong ties with their co-ethnics and the homeland through remittances, audiocassettes, and letters.<sup>50</sup> Beyond transnational economic and cultural interactions, the Hmong also maintained relations with their co-ethnics through continued and sustained political engagement with the homeland. Throughout the 1980s, a period that

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<sup>44</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Fadiman, *Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 138.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 158.

<sup>47</sup> Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 37-38; Sucheng Chan, “Scarred yet Undefeated: Hmong and Cambodian Women and Girls in the United States,” in *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women*, eds. Shirley Hune and Gail Nomura, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 255 & 258; W. Courtland Robinson, “Laotian Refugees in Thailand,” in *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, 215 & 220; Gayle L. Morrison, *Sky is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999), 26-28.

<sup>48</sup> Daphne Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Hmong,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 24, no. 1, (1992): 3; W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and International Response*, (New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1998), 107.

<sup>49</sup> Kou Yang, “Hmong Diasporas of the Post-War Period,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, no. 3, (2003): 271-300.

<sup>50</sup> Gary Yia Lee, “Dreaming Across the Oceans,” 1-33.

Fred Halliday has called the Second Cold War, no one and no organization in the United States represented the Hmong's continued engagement with the political development in the homeland or simply Hmong transnational politics better than Vang Pao and his political organization, the United Lao National Liberation Front (ULNLF), more popularly known as *Neo Hom*.<sup>51</sup>

Formed in 1981 by Vang Pao and other exiled Lao political and military leaders, including Lao Prince Chao Sisouk na Champassak, Phanga Inpeng Surigyadhad, Ngon Sananikhone, Khamphan Panya, Kouprasith Abhay, Houmphanh Saignasith, and Phoumi Nosavan, Neo Hom became the primary organ by which Vang Pao and his Hmong and Lao supporters forged their political and territorial ties to the homeland.<sup>52</sup> For Xang Vang, a long-time political advisor to Vang Pao, Neo Hom was the means by which exiled Lao and Hmong in the diaspora could rebuild community for their co-ethnics in communist Laos and Thailand.<sup>53</sup> To rebuild and restore their community back home, Vang Pao and his associates contended that it was necessary to overthrow the communist government of the Lao PDR, which they interpreted to be no more than a puppet regime for the imperialist Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In their 1981 manifesto, Vang Pao and his associates outlined the goals of Neo Hom as: (1) to struggle by all possible means against the Vietnamese invaders and force them to withdraw their occupation troops from the country, (2) to mobilize all Laotian people, outside as well as inside the country, to overthrow the puppet regime imposed on the Lao people by Socialist Vietnam, (3) to fight the expansionist policy of Socialist Vietnam and its territorial ambitions in Laos, and (4) to mobilize public opinion in favor of a democratic, neutral and peaceful Laos protected by solid international guarantees.<sup>54</sup>

To overthrow the communist Pathet Lao regime and restore the community of loyal supporters of Vang Pao and the deposed Royal Lao Government, Neo Hom leaders developed elaborate fundraising strategies to solicit and collect millions of dollars from exiled Lao and Hmong communities ostensibly to fund so-called "freedom fighters" in the Lao jungle. According to journalist Ann Fadiman, Neo Hom

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<sup>51</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, (London: Verso, 1983), 1-23.

<sup>52</sup> United Lao National Liberation Front, *Statement on the United Lao National Liberation Front*, June 1981; Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 427; Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 449-450.

<sup>53</sup> Xang Vang, interview with author, St. Paul, MN, 20 October 2008, tape recording.

<sup>54</sup> United Lao National Liberation Front, *Manifesto of the United Lao National Liberation Front*, 7 September 1981.

required members to put a \$100 down payment followed by \$2 a month per family member thereafter.<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, freelance journalist Ruth Hammond documented that to “become members of Neo Hom, families were required to pay \$100 down and then \$10 a month. Those who paid \$500 were given certificates that they believe entitle them to return to Laos after the ‘liberation,’ with the understanding that their airfare will be free and they will receive a return on their investment once back in Laos.” By the mid-1980s, when donations started to dwindle, “Neo Hom leaders began direct sales of offices in Vang Pao’s future government. Refugees paid \$1,000 or more to secure positions as police chiefs, district leaders, army officers, and cabinet members. Some people are paying up to \$1,000 a month to hold their positions.”<sup>56</sup> Shoua Yang estimated that the combined revenue Neo Hom received from Hmong supporters in the mid-1980s in the United States was nearly \$6.7 million.<sup>57</sup> By the end of 1988, according to Keith Quincy, Neo Hom had generated nearly \$9 million in revenue from its members.<sup>58</sup>

In the early 1980s, Hmong resistance forces, including Vang Pao’s Neo Hom supporters, also allied themselves with key figures connected to the Reagan Administration who were interested in locating missing U.S. servicemen in Southeast Asia and sympathetic to the Hmong anti-Communist agenda in Laos. In doing so, Hmong resistance forces in Laos, including Vang Pao’s guerrilla fighters, received an unspecified amount of money for their effort to destabilize the Communist government of Laos after John LeBoutillier, a Republican congressman from New York, Ann Mills Griffiths, executive director of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, and Lt. Col. Richard Childress, a member of the National Security Council, raised \$578,697 from wealthy individuals, corporations and foreign powers and deposited it in a bank account in Bangkok, Thailand, under the name of Mushtaq Ahmed Diwa, a friend and associate of POW activist Col. Al Shinkle.<sup>59</sup> In

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<sup>55</sup> Anne Fadiman, *Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 160.

<sup>56</sup> Ruth Hammond, “Rumors of War,” *Twin Cities Reader*, 12-31 October 1989, 10-11; Ruth Hammond, “The Laos Connection,” *Twin Cities Reader*, 14 November 1990, 12-13.

<sup>57</sup> Shoua Yang, “Hmong Social and Political Capital: The Formation and Maintenance of Hmong-American Organizations,” (Ph.D dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 2006), 184-192.

<sup>58</sup> Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat*, 454

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *POW/MIA’s*, Report of the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 13 January 1993, pp. 303-310; Michael Ross, “Probe Links ‘Reagan Doctrine’ to Covert Aid to Lao Rebels,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 1993; Michael Ross, “Senators Seek Probe of

1982, Washington provided \$5 million in covert assistance to the anti-Communist resistance groups in Cambodia.<sup>60</sup> A good deal of this money was also channeled through Thailand, and “a small fraction was [again] siphoned off to Vang Pao’s Hmong and to Pa Kao Her’s Chao Fa.”<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, during the 1980s, Vang Pao and Neo Hom engaged in transnational politics as they advocated on behalf of their co-ethnics in Laos against the military use of toxic chemical agents against Hmong families in Hmong villages and the Lao jungle. Starting in 1975 and with increasing frequency in 1977, Hmong refugees who had escaped to Thailand told doctors and relief workers in the refugee camps that the Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao regime used toxic chemical agents unknown to them to attack them in their villages and mountainous sanctuaries in the Lao jungle. When they spoke of the communists’ slow-flying aircraft attacking them in their villages with the unknown chemical agents, they mentioned smoke of various colors, including green, red, white, pink, blue, and yellow. However, the chemical agents were later dubbed “Yellow Rain” because “about 70 percent of refugee reports described the agent as an oily yellow liquid with a relatively large droplet size that made a sound like rain when it struck the ground, vegetation, and the roofs of houses.”<sup>62</sup> According to Hmong refugees, countless Hmong died from exposure to Yellow Rain through eating food or drinking water from sources contaminated with the yellowish powder. Others experienced dizziness, skin infections, blisters, blindness, stomach cramps, bloody diarrhea, and hemorrhages. For his part, Vang Pao, in early 1980, claimed that 50,000 Hmong had died from exposure to Yellow Rain between 1975 and 1978, a campaign that the Communists had initiated against the Hmong as early as August 1975 “at Mung Om and Nam Fen, south of Phu Bia, where 17,000 men, women, and children were killed.”<sup>63</sup>

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Reagan-Era POW Fund: Problers Say They Uncovered Covert Aid to Laos Rebels,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 January 1993.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Busch, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 202; Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos since 1975*, (London: Verso, 1984), 233.

<sup>61</sup> Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat*, 450.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan B. Tucker, “The ‘Yellow Rain’ Controversy: Lessons for Arms Control Compliance,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, (Spring 2001): 26.

<sup>63</sup> Jane Hamilton-Merritt, “Gas Warfare in Laos,” *Reader’s Digest*, (1980), 2.

In 1981, when the United Nations hosted an international conference on Cambodia, a nation under Vietnamese occupation since 1979, Neo Hom leaders also asked the United Nations to look into the use of poisons against the Hmong in Laos. On July 7, Prince Outhong Souvanavong, the President of the Council of Regents for the ULNLF, wrote to Kurt Waldheim, then secretary general of the United Nations, and sent copies of the letter to all of the member states of the United Nations, asking for time to present the “Laotian problems” at the United Nations conference on Cambodia.<sup>64</sup> In his letter, Souvanavong linked the Laotian problem to the Cambodian problem, stating that “the Cambodian and Laotian problems are of the same nature.”<sup>65</sup> In a separate statement, Neo Hom leaders similarly argued that “the international community must link the Laotian and Cambodian problems for a global solution.”<sup>66</sup> On July 13, 1981, Lao and Hmong Neo Hom leaders from Australia and France came to New York to join Neo Hom leaders in the United States to present their case to the United Nations. The United Nations, however, did not bring up the Laotian problem for discussion. It was resolved to focus exclusively on the Cambodian genocide. Relentlessly, Vang Pao and his supporters pressed on.

In 1982, when the U.S. Congress held a hearing on chemical weapons, Vang Pao and Xeu Vang Vangyi, then executive director of the Lao Family Community, Inc. of Santa Ana, California, were present to testify. “I am here today to convey the message of my fellow men, victims and sufferers from these man-made chemicals,” said Xeu Vang Vangyi. “The Hmong may be illiterate, but they are human beings who have feelings. They are defenseless, and their human rights are being violated, but few seem to care.... Our people have been the victims of the largest effort of chemical warfare in history—to the point of genocide.”<sup>67</sup> Vang Pao similarly voiced his concerns, stating, “Chemical warfare continues in Laos against our people—men, women, and children—who are defenseless against the communist aircraft

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<sup>64</sup> Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 429.

<sup>65</sup> Prince Outhong Souvanavong, Letter to Kurt Waldheim, 7 July 1981. In the Special Collection on the United Lao National Liberation Front, at Hmong Archives, St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>66</sup> United Lao National Liberation Front, *White Paper on the Situation of Laos*, 7 September 1981.

<sup>67</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Foreign Policy and Arms Control: Implications of Chemical Weapons*, Hearing before the Subcommittees on International Security and Scientific Affairs and on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 97<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Session., 20 March and 13 July 1982, 77.



that deliver the lethal poisons. Our people are being eliminated by the Soviet-backed Pathet Lao and Vietnamese regime in Laos because we were the backbone of the U.S. military effort in Laos.”<sup>68</sup>

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vang Pao and his associates found some sympathetic supporters in Washington, D.C. In 1979, the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, echoing the concerns of Hmong refugees, declared that “chemical warfare (CW) agents have been used in Laos by the Laotian and Vietnamese forces against dissident Meo tribesmen.”<sup>69</sup> In his report to Congress in March 1982, Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated that,

“[S]elected Lao and Vietnamese forces, under direct Soviet supervisions, have employed lethal tricothecene toxins and other combinations of chemical agents against H’Mong resisting government control and their villages since at least 1976. Thousands have been killed or severely injured. Thousands also have been driven from their homeland by the use of these agents.”<sup>70</sup>

In November 1982, the new Secretary of State, George Schultz, in an update to the Haig report, again concluded that “Vietnamese and Lao troops, under direct Soviet supervision, have continued to use lethal and incapacitating chemical agents and toxins against the H’Mong resistance in Laos throughout at least June 1982.”<sup>71</sup>

Some, however, questioned the veracity of Hmong refugees’ claims about Yellow Rain early on. Dr. Matthew Meselson, Professor of Natural Sciences at Harvard University, and his colleagues were particularly adamant about the absence of Yellow Rain in Southeast Asia. For them, what Hmong refugees called Yellow Rain were “natural occurrences” and “natural products.” More specifically, they

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<sup>68</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Foreign Policy and Arms Control: Implications of Chemical Weapons*, Hearing before the Subcommittees on International Security and Scientific Affairs and on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 97<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Session., 20 March and 13 July 1982, 91- 92.

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Use of Chemical Agents in Southeast Asia Since the Vietnam War*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, 5<sup>th</sup> Session, 12 December 1979.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan*, Report to the Congress from Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr., 22 March 1982, (Special Report No. 98), 6.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan: An Update*, Report from Secretary of State George P. Shultz, November 1982, (Special Report No. 104).

were bee feces that fell in yellow clouds when bee colonies took mass defecation flights.<sup>72</sup> In 1983, Grant Evans, a Lao specialist, also published *The Yellow Rainmakers*, repudiating the earlier findings by American journalist Sterling Seagrave in *Yellow Rain* about the presence of Yellow Rain in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup> For Evans, “neither the refugee evidence nor the scientific evidence is sufficient to conclude, as the Americans have done, that Vietnam or the Soviet Union are using lethal chemical weapons in Southeast Asia.” The refugee evidence of Yellow Rain from Laos was “largely a product of uncontrolled rumors among a tribal people, the Hmong, whose recent history and worldview predispose them to believe and recount gassing stories that have no basis in fact.”<sup>74</sup> Most recently, Merle Pribbenow, a retired CIA officer, reported that his own investigations for the agency in the 1980s did not yield any evidence conclusively showing that Yellow Rain had ever been used in Laos.<sup>75</sup>

Unwilling to accept the conclusions of Evans, Meselson and his associates, Vang Pao and his supporters continued to insist that the Communists’ use of Yellow Rain against the Hmong in Laos was real. On February 7, 1987, in a speech at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., Vang Pao charged that the Lao government, with the aid of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, had escalated the “brutalities against” the Laotian people. It also brought more than 30,000 Vietnamese citizens to settle in the resource-rich areas of Laos in addition to the 60,000 Vietnamese occupation troops already stationed in the country, and it slowly poisoned the people by toxic injections made to look like normal diseases. In his speech, Vang Pao also spoke of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as a “devious and wily imperialism” bent on “exterminating” the Laotian people and the

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<sup>72</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Yellow Rain*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, Oceans, International Operations and Environment, Committee on Foreign Relations, 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 10 November 1981; Julian Robinson, Jeanne Guillemin, and Matthew Meselson, “Yellow Rain: The Story Collapses,” *Foreign Policy* 68 (Autumn, 1987): 100-117; Matthew Meselson and Julian Robinson, “The Yellow Rain Affair: Lessons From A Discredited Allegation,” in *Terrorism, War or Disease? Unraveling the Use of Biological Weapons*, edited by Ann Clunan, Peter Lavoy, and Susan Martin, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 72-96.

<sup>73</sup> Sterling Seagrave, *Yellow Rain: A Journey through the Terror of Chemical Warfare*, (New York: M. Evans, 1981).

<sup>74</sup> Grant Evans, *The Yellow Rainmakers: Are Chemical Weapons Being Used in SE Asia?* (London: Verso, 1983), 13 & 172.

<sup>75</sup> Merle L. Pribbenow, ““Yellow Rain”: Lessons from an Earlier WMD Controversy,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 19, (2006): 737-745.

government of Laos as a “puppet regime imposed on the Laotian people by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” Outlining the goal of his organization as the liberation of the homeland by overthrowing the puppet regime imposed on the Laotian people by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Vang Pao ended the speech asking for financial support to fulfill the goal of liberating Laos and its people. With the “moral, political, and financial support from the world community, especially from the United States, People’s Republic of China, France, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Japan, ASEAN, and other Western allies,” Vang Pao said, “the Laotian people are sure that...the Resistance will be able to drive the Hanoi invasion troops out of Laos” and regain their freedom.<sup>76</sup>

It is unclear whether he received any funds from the Foundation or speaking fees, but the speech did provide Vang Pao publicity and boosted his popularity among Foundation supporters and other right-wing Congressional representatives in Washington. Vang Pao’s speech coincided nicely with U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Third World at the time. During this period of the Second Cold War, the focus of U.S. foreign policy was what journalist Charles Krauthammer called the Reagan Doctrine in a *Time* magazine article in 1985.<sup>77</sup> This doctrine refers to U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s policy, after taking office in 1981, to roll back Soviet imperialism in the world through the militarization of anti-Soviet and anti-communist guerrillas in the countries that had fallen into the Soviet orbit, including Laos and Vietnam. For Reagan, supporting anti-Soviet and anti-communist freedom fighters was a moral obligation, a right, and a tradition of the United States. As he outlined in his State of the Union address on February 6, 1985, “We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth... Support for freedom fighters is self-defense.”<sup>78</sup> “Time and again,” Reagan added, “we have aided those around the world struggling for freedom, democracy, and independence from tyranny... In the 19<sup>th</sup> century we supported Simon Bolivar, the great liberator. We supported the Polish patriots, the

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<sup>76</sup> General Vang Pao, *Against All Odds: The Laotian Freedom Fighters*, (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1987).

<sup>77</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “Essay: The Reagan Doctrine,” *Time*, 1 April 1985, 54-55.

<sup>78</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address before a Joint Session of Congress of the State of the Union, February 6, 1985,” *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan 1985*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988), 135.

French resistance and others seeking freedom. It's not in the American tradition to turn away."<sup>79</sup> In the end, the Reagan Doctrine made the United States look the other way in regards to Neo Hom's fundraising activities to aid resistance groups in Laos and Thailand. The Reagan Doctrine also enabled Vang Pao to publicly declare a mobilization against the government of Laos and secure sympathy and support from politically conservative individuals and institutions connected to the Reagan administration, such as Vietnam War veteran Colonel Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt, Carl Bernard (a highly decorated veteran of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War), the Heritage Foundation, the American Freedom Foundation, GeoMiliTech Consultants Corporation, the Free Congress Foundation, and the ultra-right-wing Civilian Military Assistance (CMA).<sup>80</sup>

### **Transnational Politics in the New World Order**

In the 1990s, Hmong transnational politics involved opposition to Thailand's repatriation of Hmong refugees to communist Laos and later the United States' policy to extend Normalized Trade Relations (NTR) status to Laos. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, the United States no longer needed the support of anti-Soviet "freedom fighters" in the Third World. Rather than continuing its Cold War policy of confrontation against Soviet-back communist Laos and Vietnam, the United States shifted to establish diplomatic and trade relations with its former enemies.

To build relations with Laos and seek its assistance in locating Americans still missing from the Secret War, the United States agreed with Laos and Thailand to work together to shut down all the refugee camps in Thailand. Until the end of the Cold War, the camps, especially Ban Vinai, had served as centers for recruiting and mobilizing fighters, both Hmong and non-Hmong, opposed to the Lao PDR government. In 1989, Thailand, Laos, and the United States came together with sixty-seven other governments at the Second Conference on Indochinese Refugees in Geneva and adopted a new regional

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Ted Galen Carpenter, "U.S. Aid to Anti-Communist Rebels: The 'Reagan Doctrine' and Its Pitfalls," *Policy Analysis* 74, (Washington, D.C: Cato Institute, 1986):1. Retrieved on 5 August 2009 from <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa074.htm>.

<sup>80</sup> Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 277.

approach known as the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA).<sup>81</sup> The CPA proposed repatriating all Hmong determined not to be refugees to Laos and resettling all those classified as genuine refugees in “third countries.”<sup>82</sup> In June 1991, Thailand, Laos, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) finally signed the Luang Prabang Tripartite Agreement, which the U.S. State Department helped to broker in an attempt to help clear Thailand of its remaining Laotian refugees. Calling for the repatriation of all the refugees who refused to resettle in a third country by the end of 1995,

[T]he Bush administration contributed \$15 million to subsidize the cost of closing the camps and transporting Lao and Hmong back to Laos. When Clinton replaced Bush, the White House continued the commitment, donating \$3 million between 1993 and 1994 to help defray the costs of repatriation.<sup>83</sup>

Symbolic of a shift in U.S. policy, U.S. President George H. Bush also severed all official and unofficial ties with all the Lao and Hmong resistance groups and ended its previous support for the Hmong in their efforts to stop the military use of toxic Soviet-engineered “Yellow Rain” by government forces against the Hmong still living in the Lao jungle.

Vang Pao and his supporters vehemently opposed the closing of Hmong refugee camps and especially the repatriation of Hmong refugees to communist Laos. With the camps gone, Vang Pao and his supporters knew the Hmong would also have no place to recruit more fighters to go across the border to fight communist government forces in Laos. In the early 1990s, Vang Pobzeb, a strong supporter of Vang Pao and Executive Director of the Wisconsin-based Lao Human Rights Council did whatever he could to stop the repatriation of Hmong refugees from Thailand to Laos. In June 1991, Vang Pobzeb, with the help of other Hmong leaders in Neo Hom, organized a demonstration in Washington, D.C. to protest the repatriation of Hmong refugees to Laos. Xang Vang, an advisor and interpreter to Vang Pao

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<sup>81</sup> W. Courtland Robinson, “The Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees, 1989-1997: Sharing the Burden and Passing the Buck,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no. 3, (2004): 320; Sara Davies, *Legitimizing Rejection: International Refugee Law in Southeast Asia*, (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008), 198; S.A. Bronee, “The History of the Comprehensive Plan of Action,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 5, no. 4, (1993): 540.

<sup>82</sup> Refugee Policy Group (RPG), *The Second International Conference on Indochinese Refugees: A New Humanitarian Consensus?* (Washington, D.C.: The RPG, 1989), 30.

<sup>83</sup> Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 469.

and Neo Hom, brought ninety Hmong supporters from the Twin Cities to Washington to join the several thousand Hmong from California, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and other states that day. At the protest, Xang Vang carried a sign that read: "Help! Vietnamese Are Eating My Motherland." Laos, he implied, was still under Vietnamese control, and Hmong refugees would face persecution and death if they were sent back to Vietnamese-controlled Laos.<sup>84</sup> Explaining the purpose of the demonstration in Washington, D.C., Vang Pobzeb, said:

We the Hmong and Laotian Americans and refugees are demonstrating in Washington, D.C., the capitol of the United States, and the world because we believe in democracy, human rights, and freedom of the people. We are here...[because] those refugees should have the right to stay inside Thailand as long as they want.... We are here to request that the U.S. government must request the Thai government to stop the objective of forced repatriation of Hmong and Laotian refugees to Laos without the consent of the returnees.<sup>85</sup>

On August 15, 1991, Vang Pobzeb sent a letter to President Bush asking him to help stop the repatriation of Hmong refugees to Laos. "The refugees, returnees and the dead in Laos need your support and help," he wrote. "The U.S. Government should consider that neither the policy of voluntary repatriation nor forced repatriation is acceptable to the refugees and returnees. These two policies are forcing the refugees to death roads."<sup>86</sup> On September 25, 1991, Vang submitted a white paper on the murders and persecutions of the Hmong and Laotian returnees in Laos to U.S. Congress and President Bush. In this white paper, he reported that between 800 and 2,000 Hmong repatriates had died between 1989 and 1991.<sup>87</sup> On July 21, 1992, Vang joined other Hmong in a demonstration in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Declaring that the UNHCR and the U.S. Department of State had authorized Thailand to force Hmong

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<sup>84</sup> Les Suzukamo, "Hmong Fight Plan to Send Refugee Kin Back to Laos," *Pioneer Press*, 8 June 1991.

<sup>85</sup> Vang Pobzeb, *White Paper on the Purposes of Hmong and Laotian Demonstrations in Washington, D.C., on June 9-10, 1991*, 3 June 1991.

<sup>86</sup> Vang Pobzeb, Letter to President George H.W. Bush, 15 August 1991.

<sup>87</sup> Vang Pobzeb, *White Paper on the Murders and Persecutions of the Hmong and Laotian Returnees in Laos*, Submitted to U.S. Congress and President, 25 September 1991.

refugees to Laos to be “exterminated,” he called upon Congress to “stop the forced repatriation of Hmong refugees from Thailand to Laos before it is too late.”<sup>88</sup>

In April 1994, while the repatriation of Hmong refugees from Thailand to Laos was underway, Vang Pobzeb joined other Hmong leaders in Washington, D.C., to testify before the Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee of the House of Foreign Affairs Committee during a hearing on Hmong repatriation. At the hearing, he reported that there were “about 4,500 cases of forced repatriation from 1991 to 1994” and presented a petition with 56,000 signatures and fingerprints from refugees in Thailand who opposed the repatriation.<sup>89</sup> From December 26, 1994 to January 2, 1995, the Lao Human Rights Council cooperated with the office of Congressman Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin in sending a team on a fact-finding mission to visit the Napho refugee camp and six prisoners in Bangkok, Thailand. The delegates urged the Thai government and the UNHCR to release the prisoners, stop the repatriation of Hmong refugees from Napho refugee camp to Laos, and resettle more refugees from Napho in the United States.<sup>90</sup>

Despite their protests and letter-writing campaigns, Hmong activists could not prevent Thailand from shutting down what Hmong refugees considered their only refuge after the war. In 1992, 7,500 Hmong refugees were resettled in the United States, and 1,700 Hmong were repatriated to Laos. Meanwhile, 10,000 Hmong refugees who rejected both resettlement and repatriation moved to Wat Thamkrabok, a Buddhist monastery in Saraburi Province, north of Bangkok. As many as 8,000 others took to the mountains to secretly live in Hmong villages in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Tak, Phetchabun, and Phitsanulok provinces.<sup>91</sup> Between 1992 and 1994, more than 25,000 Hmong immigrated to the

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<sup>88</sup> Statement of Vang Pobzeb, Chairman of the Lao Human Rights Council in the United States, to the Hmong-American Demonstration in Green Bay, Wisconsin, 21 July 1992. Included as Appendix I in Vang Pobzeb, *White Paper on Demonstrations of Hmong Refugees and Letters From the Napho and Ban Vinai Camps, Thailand, to President Bill Clinton in 1993*, (Eau Claire, WI: Lao Human Rights Council, 1993).

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Indochinese Refugees*, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 26 April 1994, pp. 73-75.

<sup>90</sup> Vang Pobzeb, “Accomplishments of the Lao Human Rights Council, 1987-1997,” <http://www.laohumrights.org/laoact02.htm>, accessed 19 September 2005; Tim Bartl and Phillip Smith, *Report to the Congress of the United States: Fact Finding Mission to Thailand Regarding the Status of Hmong/Lao Refugees and Asylum Seekers, December 28, 1994 to January 2, 1995*, (Washington, D.C.: House of Representatives, 1995).

<sup>91</sup> Hiram A. Ruiz, “Tough Times for Refugees in Thailand,” *News From the U.S. Committee for Refugees*, 1 July 1993; Marc Kaufman, “Allies Abandoned,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 February 1994.

United States. During the same period, more than 14,000 Hmong refugees were repatriated—some allegedly after being coerced—to Laos under the terms of the CPA and the Luang Prabang Tripartite Agreement.<sup>92</sup> By the end of 1995, all the refugee camps set up to accommodate refugees from Laos, including Ban Vinai, Chiang Kham and Napho, were closed.

The closing of the refugee camps, however, did not end Hmong transnational politics. After President William Jefferson Clinton initiated bilateral trade agreements with Laos and Vietnam in 1997, Vang Pao, his supporters, and organizations connected to Vang Pao, including the Lao Veterans of America (LVA), Lao Human Rights Council, and United Lao Movement for Democracy (ULMD) became some of the main opponents of the United States extending Normal Trade Relations (NTR) treatment to Laos. They argued that the Lao PDR government should first improve its poor human rights record, particularly its treatment of Hmong people in Laos, before the United States extended NTR to Laos.<sup>93</sup> Granting NTR status to Laos would not improve the livelihoods of most people there. On the contrary, they said, granting NTR would strengthen the communist regime, enabling it to massacre more Hmong and Lao people. Furthermore, NTR with Laos would, they believed, work against U.S. interests. Laos had both professed friendship with North Korea and denounced the first U.S.-led war in Iraq.<sup>94</sup> Thus, for NTR opponents, the only way to “save lives that have not yet been lost” was to continue exerting pressure on the Lao PDR government for economic restructuring and democratic reform.<sup>95</sup>

In October 1997, eighty Hmong men and their wives demonstrated on the steps of the Capitol against Clinton administration efforts to improve trade relations with Laos. At the demonstration, Wangyee Vang, president of LVA, called the administration’s policy toward Laos “a disaster.” In his

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<sup>92</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Remapping Asian American History*, (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), 209.

<sup>93</sup> See written statements by Vang Pobzeb of Lao Human Rights Council, Phillip Smith of Lao Veterans of America, Chuhu Xiong of International Hmong Human Rights Watch in U.S. Congress, House of Representative, *Written Comments on the Extension of Normal Trade Relations to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, Subcommittee on Trade of the Committee on Ways and Means, 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, (Washington, D.C: 1999), 1-44.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 29 April 2004; Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 22 November 2004.

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Wangyee Vang’s statement, in U.S. Congress, House of Representative, *Written Comments on the Extension of Normal Trade Relations to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, Subcommittee on Trade of the Committee on Ways and Means, 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, (Washington, D.C: 1999), 29.



words, Vang said, “The administration’s recent policy to fully normalize relations with the communist regime in Laos, lift the ban on foreign assistance to Laos, work to provide most-favored-nation (MFN) trade status and repatriate the remaining Hmong refugees [in Thailand] was a disaster for the Hmong people.” Describing the Lao PDR government’s human rights record, Vang Pobzeb of Lao Human Rights Council added, “About 25,000 Hmong and Lao people were arrested, imprisoned and killed by the communist government from 1990 to 1997.... Soldiers of the communist Lao government had massacred and killed eight Hmong civilians in the village of Moung Ou, Moung Cha area, northern Laos on January 16, 1997.”<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, others Hmong and Lao Americans, including Dr. Yang Dao, a former Neo Hom officer, and his colleagues supported extending NTR status to Laos.<sup>97</sup> They argued that NTR would help raise exports and job creation and lift many Laotians, including the Hmong minority in Laos, out of dire poverty. Opposing NTR would further prevent the path of reconciliation between the diaspora and the Lao PDR government and bring more suffering to the Hmong minority in the country. Ultimately, NTR would bolster U.S. leverage with Laos, including pressure on human rights issues, and help reformers within the Lao government push for political and economic reform in the country.<sup>98</sup>

In 1999, when Congressman Phillip M. Crane (R-IL) solicited written public comments for the record from all parties interested and involved in the NTR issue, Vang Pobzeb of the LHRC, Wangyee Vang and Phillip Smith of the Lao Veterans of America, and others expressed the same concerns for human rights conditions in Laos in their opposition to NTR. Vang Pobzeb, then, argued that the United States must deny NTR to Laos because the Lao PDR government had committed “war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity.” Similarly, Wangyee Vang urged the United States to

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<sup>96</sup> Ben Barber, “U.S. Policy toward Laos divides Hmong community in America: War Veterans’ Claims of Genocide Disputed,” *Washington Times*, 4 December 1997.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.; Vaudine England, “Laotians Are Divided Over U.S. Trade,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 September 2004; Frederic J. Frommer, “Free Trade Deal for Laos Splits Hmong Community,” *Associated Press*, 6 May 2003; U.S.-Lao NTR Coalition, *NTR Bills: House Bill H.R. 3943 and Senate Bill S2200*. Washington, D.C., March 2004.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 29 April 2004; Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 22 November 2004.

“continue to withhold normal trade relations [with Laos] until basic human rights are restored and monitored in Laos.” Chuhu Xiong of the Hmong International Human Rights Watch in Chicago, Illinois, also contended that, before the United States extended NTR status to Laos, it must ask the Lao PDR government to withdraw all its troops from Saysomboun Special Zone which the Lao PDR had used to launch repeated military assaults against displaced Hmong families in the area.<sup>99</sup>

In the early 2000s, Vang Pao and his supporters, including Vang Pobzeb, Wangyee Vang, and Phillip Smith, found sympathetic allies in Congress, which helped delay the United States government’s extension of NTR status to Laos. The arrest of two Bangkok-based European journalists, Belgian Thierry Falise and Frenchman Vincent Reynaud, and their interpreter, Rev. Naw Karl Mua, a Hmong-American pastor of the Light of Life Lutheran Church in St. Paul, on June 4, 2003, however, further interrupted the passage of NTR.<sup>100</sup> The men were arrested as they tried to document human rights abuses and religious persecution in Laos and write a follow-up report to Andrew Perrin’s heart-wrenching accounts on the plight of the Hmong in the Lao jungle in *Time Asia* magazine in May 2003.<sup>101</sup> Pressures from the Hmong community and their Congressional supporters, including MN Senator Norm Coleman, eventually forced the government of Laos to release the pastor and journalists on July 9 after having sentenced them to 15 years in prison for the killing of a village security officer, obstruction of police work, and illegal possession of a gun and an explosive device.<sup>102</sup> On July 10, Naw Karl Mua arrived back in St. Paul.<sup>103</sup> In the end, Congress did not extend NTR status to Laos until late 2004.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See written statements by Vang Pobzeb of Lao Human Rights Council, Phillip Smith of Lao Veterans of America, Chuhu Xiong of International Hmong Human Rights Watch in U.S. Congress, House of Representative, *Written Comments on the Extension of Normal Trade Relations to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, Subcommittee on Trade of the Committee on Ways and Means, 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, (Washington, D.C: 1999), 1-44.

<sup>100</sup> Todd Nelson, “St. Paul Pastor Arrested in Laos,” *Pioneer Press*, 12 June 2003; Martha Sawyer Allen, “St. Paul Pastor, 2 Journalists Detained in Laos,” *Star Tribune*, 12 June 2003; Ron Corben, “Lao Arrests European Journalists, American in Battle with Rebels,” *Bangkok Post*, 11 June 2003; Seth Mydans, “2 Journalists and U.S. Clergyman Are Reported Held in Laos,” *New York Times*, 16 June 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Perrin, “Welcome to the Jungle,” *Time Asia Magazine*, 5 May 2003; Frederic J. Frommer, “Minnesota: Coleman Urges Slow Approach to Laos Trade,” *Associated Press/Pioneer Press*, 21 June 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Vijay Joshi, “St. Paul Pastor, 2 Others Sentenced to 15 Years in Laotian Jail,” *Associated Press*, 30 June 2003; “The Hmong: Forgotten People of Laos,” *BBC News*, 30 June 2003; and “Laos Court Finds Foreigners Guilty,” *BBC News*, 30 June 2003.

## Transnational Politics after 9/11

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on New York City on September 11, 2001, many Hmong Americans intensified their efforts to push for democratic reforms, including human rights and even ethnic autonomy for the Hmong in Laos. A reaction to the continued efforts by the Lao PDR government to end the Hmong insurgency in the jungles of Laos, their intensification resulted in the formation of numerous new organizations, including Voices of Sorrow in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Facts Finding Commission (FFC) in Oroville, California, and Hmong Human Rights (HHR) in Madison, Wisconsin.<sup>105</sup> In the summer of 2004, Voices of Sorrow, led by a twenty-year-old female college student named Amee Xiong at Hamline University, organized “the Long Walk for Freedom” from St. Paul to Washington D.C.<sup>106</sup> Later restructured as Hmoob Hlub Hmoob (literally translated to Hmong Love Hmong) or Humanity Helping Humanity (HHH), the Voices of Sorrow produced a CD entitled “The H Project: Silence No More” to raise awareness about “the suffering and genocide of Hmong people still trapped behind enemy lines in Laos.”<sup>107</sup> Xiong, initially through her advocacy for human rights protections for the Hmong in the Lao jungle, later became a community

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<sup>103</sup> Tom Webb, “Washington, D.C.: Ambassador Urges Resolution For Pastor,” *Pioneer Press*, 26 June 2003; Tom Webb and Todd Nelson, “Scenario Outlined to Free Pastor,” *Pioneer Press*, 28 June 2004; Tom LaVenture, “Welcome Home: Rev. Mua Relieved But Grieves for Hmong Laos,” *Asian American Press*, 18 July 2003, 1&9; “Minnesota Minister Freed From Laos Prison Said He Did Not Admit Guilt,” *Associated Press*, 12 July 2003.

<sup>104</sup> Kevin Diaz, “Senate Approves Measure to Normalize Trade with Laos,” *Star Tribune*, 20 November 2004; Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 5 February 2007; Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 19 October 2005; Thomas Lum, “Laos: Background and U.S. Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RS20931, 22 January 2007.

<sup>105</sup> For reports on the Hmong still hiding in the Laos and the ongoing campaign by the Lao government against the Hmong in Laos, see Amnesty International, *Lao PDR, Hiding in the Jungle: Hmong Under Threat*, 23 March 2007; Rebecca Sommer, *Report on the Situation in the Xaysomboun Special Zone and 110 Hmong-Lao Refugees who Escaped to Petchabun, Thailand 2004-2005*, May 2006; Roger Arnold, “Still A Secret War,” *Digital Journalist*, October 2006; Roger Arnold, “Update: Still A Secret War, Part II,” *The Digital Journalist*, August 2007; Thomas Fuller, “Old U.S. Allies, Still Hiding in Laos,” *New York Times*, 17 December 2007; Thomas Fuller, “CIA-Backed Soldiers Still on Run,” *New York Times*, 24 December 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Tom LaVenture, “Trek To Help Save Hmong Allies,” *Asian American Press*, 18 June 2004; Wameng Moua, “Long Walk For Freedom Takes The First Steps to Washington, D.C.,” *Hmong Today*, 17 June 2004; Wameng Moua, “The Long Walk Approaches Washington DC,” *Hmong Today*, 29 July 2004; Wameng Moua, “Arrived! The Long Walk for Freedom reaches Washington D.C.” *Hmong Today*, (August 26, 2004): 1 & 10.

<sup>107</sup> Amee Xiong, interview with author, St. Paul, MN, 8 January 2010, tape recording; Matthew Thao, “The H Project: Silence No More,” 2005, CD.

organizer at TakeActionMinnesota, a political organization based in St. Paul, Minnesota, that focuses primarily on domestic American politics. The FFC, based in Oroville, California, also posted photos of innocent Hmong women and children who had been raped and killed, supposedly by Lao PDR government forces, on the internet.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, Hmong Human Rights (HHR), a student-led organization at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, aggressively lobbied Congress to help stop the deportation of Hmong refugees from Thailand to Laos and the killings of the Hmong in the Lao jungle.<sup>109</sup> Like Amee Xiong, James Chang, a co-founder of the HHR, through the door of transnational politics, later made his entry into ethnic politics. Upon graduation from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Chang became Minnesota State Senator Mee Moua's legislative aide.<sup>110</sup>

In July 2004, Vang Pao also formed the United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction (ULCPFR) with the former Royal Lao government Minister, Dr. Khamphay Abhay, based in Australia, as a replacement for the dissolved ULNLF. They called on "all Laotians in the free world to advocate for the freedom fighters and help promote peace, justice, freedom and affect democratic changes to the Laotian people."<sup>111</sup> Four months later, Vang Pao brought together some 439 registered delegates from Australia, Canada, France, Laos, and the United States to Minnesota to develop a new strategy to "resolve the Lao conflict by peaceful means."<sup>112</sup>

Of particular interest were the creation of a number of new Hmong nationalist organizations, most of which were off-shoots of Zong Zoua Her and Pa Kao Her's Thailand-based *Chao Fa* organization—the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL), later renamed Democratic Chao Fa

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<sup>108</sup> For photos and other reports by Facts Finding Commissions, see website at <http://www.factfinding.org/>.

<sup>109</sup> Lee S. Jadaan, "UWP Students Take Action in Washington, D.C. for Displaced Hmong Population," *Daily Pioneer News*, 17 March 2009; Ellyn Ferguson, "Hmong Want Obama's Support Fighting Thailand's Forced Deportations," *Post-Crescent Washing Bureau*, 7 February 2009; Hmong Human Rights, "Hmong Human Rights Speaker Forum, December 5, 2009," brochure. Even also advertised on their website at <http://hasa.rso.wisc.edu/HHRspeakerforum.html> (accessed 23 February 2010). Author attended the forum on December 5, 2009.

<sup>110</sup> James Chang, interview with author, St. Paul, Minnesota, 8 May 2009, tape recording.

<sup>111</sup> United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction, *The Lao Conflict: Background, Basic Strategies and Intelligence*, (Fresno, CA, 2004).

<sup>112</sup> Hlee Lee, "First Meeting of the United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction," *Hmong Times*, 1 December 2004; ULCPFR, *Letter of Appointment*, 20 December 2004, Special Collections, Hmong Archives, St. Paul, MN.

Party of Laos—even though Zong Zoua had died in Laos in 2000 and Pa Kao had been assassinated in Thailand in 2002. These new groups included the World Hmong People’s Congress (WHPC), the Congress of World Hmong People (CWHP), and the Hmoob Mojthem Foundation (HMF). Unlike either the ULNLF or the ELOL of the past, these new organizations were entirely Hmong organizations that advocated for the creation of separate and sovereign Hmong states in northern Laos. The WHPC and its cognate, the CWHP, in particular, were profoundly influenced by the global resurgence of indigenous movements for cultural rights and political autonomy in the new millennium. Leaders of the groups regularly participated in special hearings on the rights of indigenous peoples at the United Nations, and they frequently demonstrated alongside other indigenous peoples. Using a discourse based on the right to self-determination and a revisionist construction of history, its leaders drew up a map of Laos asserting the right of Hmong Chao Fa to ethnic autonomy or political control over marked territory shortly after the WHPC joined the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in February 2007. Similarly, on January 15, 2008, CWHP leaders called for Laos to be partitioned at the 18-degree parallel along Highway 8, Lakxao, Bolikhamxai Province, turning the area north of Highway 8 into a Chao Fa state and the portion below Highway 8 into a Lao Communist state.<sup>113</sup> As they promoted the partitioning of Laos, CWHP leaders argued that, as an indigenous population in Laos, the Hmong had the right to reclaim land that was historically under their control prior to the French colonization of Indochina and the subsequent emergence of the modern states of mainland Southeast Asia, including Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar.<sup>114</sup>

Through its radio program, funded entirely by donations from Hmong people across the United States, the HMF also promoted what its leaders called “Hmong nationalism” and self-governance in Laos. Unlike the WHPC and CWHP, however, the HMF believed that the Hmong people inside Laos who were victims of state violence and oppression, not the diaspora or other external powers such as the United

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<sup>113</sup> Congress of World Hmong People, “Call for the Creation of a Hmong State—Partition Laos,” *International Communication*, No. 615/99, 15 January 2008, 1-4; UNPO General Assembly Member Resolution, introduced by Hmong Chaofa, at IX UNPO General Assembly, Brussels, Belgium, 16-17 May 2008.

<sup>114</sup> Gymbay Moua, interview with author, St. Paul, MN, 9 March 2009, tape recording.

States and the United Nations, held the key to Hmong liberation and national sovereignty. Accordingly, in the early 2000s, as increasing numbers of Hmong families in the Lao jungle came out and crossed the border to Thailand, HMF leaders encouraged them to stay in the Lao jungle to continue to fight for their autonomy rather than surrendering to the Lao PDR government or fleeing to Thailand. Their message was that the United States had no further plans to resettle additional Hmong refugees, and that Hmong families would not be safe coming out from the jungle to live in Laos or Thailand. Therefore, the best option for the Hmong in the jungle would be to stay and fight for their autonomy for as long as they could. Their continued persecution by Lao government forces would bolster their claim for secessionism. As victims, who could not have any peaceful and meaningful existence under the communist Lao PDR government, they could claim their right to self-determination in Laos.<sup>115</sup>

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department's program to resettle 15,000 Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok in the United States in late 2003 and the subsequent desecration of 900 Hmong graves at the Buddhist monastery provided yet another window of opportunity for Hmong in the United States to engage in transnational politics in Southeast Asia.<sup>116</sup> Even Hmong ethnic politicians, like MN State Representative Cy Thao and MN State Senator Mee Moua, could not remain bystanders to Hmong transnational politics when they saw the images of the egregious desecration of Hmong graves in Hmong newspapers and videos. After Hmong graves were desecrated in 2005, Sen. Mee Moua and Rep. Cy Thao became leading spokespersons against the desecration. They fought for Hmong cultural and religious rights and used their positions to garner congressional and international support to halt the desecration of Hmong graves and bring charges against the authorities of Wat Tham Krabok and the Bhoti Pavana Chinese Foundation responsible for the digging.

On March 2, 2006, Moua and her husband, Yee Chang, and Professor Barbara Frey, director of the University of Minnesota Human Rights Program, organized a town hall meeting and letter writing

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<sup>115</sup> Yuepheng Xiong, interview with author, St. Paul, MN, 22 October 2008, tape recording.

<sup>116</sup> Embassy of the U.S.A., "The U.S. to Open A Refugee Resettlement Program for Lao/Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok," 18 December 2003; Tunya Sukpanich, "Home At Last?" *Bangkok Post*, 11 January 2004; Thomas Lum, "Laos: Background and U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RL 34320, 7 January 2008; Bill McEwen, "Destined For Fresno," *Fresno Bee*, 9 May 2004; Wameng Moua, "Hmong Graves at the Wat Being Exhumed," *Hmong Today*, 1 December 2005.

campaign at Lao Family Community in St. Paul. Nearly 400 concerned Hmong community members attended the meeting to express their personal grievances. Many brought with them land titles, indicating when and for how much they had purchased the land on which they had buried their loved ones, to show that they had the right to bury their loved ones on the land.<sup>117</sup> A month later, more than 200 Hmong, at the urging of Mee Moua, crammed into the rotunda at the state capitol to hear the resolution that Moua had asked the Minnesota legislature to pass earlier to end the desecration of Hmong graves at Wat Tham Krabok and get justice for the Hmong.<sup>118</sup>

In September 2007, Sen. Mee Moua, St. Paul Mayor's Policy Associate Va-Megn Thao, community activist Yee Chang, Senate Majority Leader Larry Pogemiller, and others led an official fact finding delegation to Thailand, where they met with Thai government officials and leaders of the two religious organizations responsible for the desecration of Hmong graves at the monastery.<sup>119</sup> On December 3, 2008, writing about the grave desecration in *Hmong Times*, another local newspaper in St. Paul, Moua explained,

In October and November 2005, more than 900 Hmong graves were disinterred at Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist monastery in Thailand that served for more than a decade as home to thousands of Hmong families fleeing persecution after the communist takeover of Laos in 1975. While most of the graves were on monastery grounds, many were located on plots of land purchased by the refugees and the exhumations were carried out without the notice, consent or involvement of the relatives of the deceased.<sup>120</sup>

Finally, on December 10, Mee Moua and Cy Thao joined Professor Barbara Frey and the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota in hosting a hearing at the university on the desecration of Hmong graves. Professor James Anaya, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, was at the hearing to take Hmong testimonies. In her

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<sup>117</sup> Wameng Moua, "Hundreds Gather to Protest Grave Diggings," *Hmong Today*, 17 March 2006.

<sup>118</sup> Wameng Moua, "Minnesota Pushes For Human Rights Justice," *Hmong Today*, 28 April 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Human Rights Program, University of Minnesota, "Timeline of Events – Hmong Grave Desecrations," 2008.

<sup>120</sup> Mee Moua, "United Nations Special Rapporteur to Hear Testimony on Grave Desecrations in Thailand," *Hmong Times*, 3 December 2008.

moving speech at the hearing, Moua said: “As a people, the Hmong believe that the burial sites of our loved ones are sacred temples, a place not only for their bodies but a home for their souls. A violation of this sacred ground is tantamount to the destruction of our place of worship and the displacement of our ancestors’ souls. For the victim families who have been affected by this violation, the consequences have varied from physical ailments to emotional distress to spiritual disturbances. Many of these families will have to wrestle with how to repair this violation for generations to come.”

Speaking directly to Professor Anaya, Moua added, “Today, we are here . . . to ask that you, as the representative of an international body, charged with the opportunity to make the case, help us to recognize the wrong that has been perpetrated, bear witness to the adverse consequences dealt to the victim families, and protect all future grave sites from future desecrations. Let this be the last time any people should ever have to witness their loved ones violated in this manner.”<sup>121</sup>

In short, in the early 2000s, not only was there a resurgence of transnational politics due to the increased visibility of political issues in Southeast Asia through the Hmong media but there was also a change in the type of people who became involved in transnational politics. Until the new millennium, people engaged in transnational politics were largely Hmong male leaders of the first or elder generation, individuals such as Vang Pao, Dr. Yang Dao, and Pa Kao Her. Many of them engaged in transnational politics to liberate their fellow Hmong from communist retaliation and persecution in Laos, seek safe haven for Hmong refugees in Thailand, and find ways to return to a new and more politically stable and democratic Laos. Meanwhile, the younger generations were pushing for integration into American society, and they were criticizing the engagement of the older generation in transnational politics as backward-looking, backward-thinking, and separatist. They concentrated on achieving the “American Dream” in the United States. However, after the dawn of the new millennium, 1.5-generation and second generation Hmong community leaders and activists, such as those in *Voices of Sorrow*, the *World Hmong People’s Congress* and others, found it increasingly difficult to separate their political engagement in the United States from politics back in the homeland. Undoubtedly, many members of the younger

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<sup>121</sup> Mee Moua, Welcome Remarks at the UN Hearing on Desecration of Hmong Graves in Thailand, on the Occasion of the Visit of Special Rapporteur James Anaya, 10 December 2008.



generation, especially the second generation, had no desire to return to Laos. Yet, they recognized that their destiny in the United States was inextricably bound to the destiny of the Hmong people in Laos. Political events in Laos directly affected their lives and the lives of their parents and communities in the United States. Many of their parents still had siblings and relatives in Laos, and many of their parents were still deeply involved in politics back home. More importantly, they recognized that the Hmong people back in Laos and the Hmong people in the diaspora were one people. As Amee Xiong, the leader of Voices of Sorrow and an organizer for the Long Walk for Freedom, declared in June 2004 to kick off the walk, “I am very disappointed and sad at the lack of awareness in the U.S. Congress of the issue of the suffering Hmong people in the jungles of Laos....I have become very passionate about this issue because *these Hmong people are OUR PEOPLE.*”<sup>122</sup> Despite their geographical separation, they were members of the same nation or “imagined community.”<sup>123</sup> They understood that the Hmong American community was not just a U.S.-geographically bounded community; it was a global community. They saw no problem with having their feet in multiple societies and no contradiction in their simultaneous participation in ethnic politics and transnational politics. Most of all, they saw that ethnic or domestic politics and transnational politics were different forms of political participation in the United States, and both were necessary for the liberation of the Hmong worldwide.

## **Conclusion**

Thailand and Laos have worked to end the refugee mess in Thailand by resettling Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok in the United States and later deporting all of the Hmong refugees in Huay Nam Khao and the detention center in Nong Khai back to Laos. On December 28, 2009, five days after the Lao PDR government rejected Vang Pao’s request to return to Laos, 5,000 Thai troops and security officers rounded up the 158 Hmong refugees in a prison compound in Nong Khai and the last

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<sup>122</sup> Amee Xiong, Speech delivered at state capitol, St. Paul, MN, 15 June 2004, in Special Collections, Hmong Archives, St. Paul, MN.

<sup>123</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983).

4,000 Hmong in Huay Nam Kham and sent them across the Friendship Bridge to Laos.<sup>124</sup> Hmong Americans, however, continue to engage in transnational politics because the repatriation of Hmong refugees to Laos did not entirely end their displacement. After the repatriation, Hmong activists and families in America continued to inquire about the fate and whereabouts of many Hmong repatriates. To this day, the whereabouts of many of the Hmong repatriates are still unknown to Hmong in the diaspora. More significantly, Hmong Americans continue to engage in transnational politics because the fighting between the Lao PDR government and the Hmong in Laos has not entirely ended. Remnants of the Hmong secret army and the Lao PDR government are still embroiled in a secret war in the Lao jungle.<sup>125</sup> It is unfortunate that the Lao PDR government rejected Vang Pao's proposal to return to Laos to discuss a plan to end the fighting.<sup>126</sup> As long as the fighting in the Lao jungle continues, the Hmong in the United States will continue to engage in transnational politics in spite of the potential risk of being labeled as perpetual foreigners or terrorists for their roles in the conflict in Laos. As long as the people in the Lao jungle are also not fully accepted as legitimate Lao residents and citizens and reintegrated into Lao society, the Hmong diaspora will continue to advocate for their safety and try to find a safe place or a home for them. Some Hmong will also continue to promote Hmong separatist aspirations and the result will be more deaths and injuries to hundreds and thousands of people on both sides of the conflict in the

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<sup>124</sup> Rachel Harvey, "Repatriated Hmong Arrive in Laos," *BBC News*, 26 February 2010; Ron Corben, "Thailand Begins Repatriation to Laos of Hmong Migrants," *Bangkok Post*, 28 December 2009; Seth Mydans, "Thailand Begins Repatriation of Hmong to Laos," *New York Times*, 28 December 2009.

<sup>125</sup> Roger Arnold, "Still A Secret War," *Digital Journalist*, October 2006; Roger Arnold, "Update: Still A Secret War, Part II," *The Digital Journalist*, August 2007; Thomas Fuller, "Old U.S. Allies, Still Hiding in Laos," *New York Times*, 17 December 2007; Thomas Fuller, "CIA-Backed Soldiers Still on Run," *New York Times*, 24 December 2007; Amnesty International, "Lao People's Democratic Republic, Hiding in the Jungle: Hmong Under Threat," 23 March 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Stephen Magagnini, "Vang Pao Says He's Return to Laos: Ex-General Is Aiming for Reconciliation," *Sacramento Bee*, 23 December 2009; Kim Briggeman, "General Who Brought Hmong to Bitterroot, Missoula Vows Liberation of Those Left in Laos," *The Missoulian*, 26 December 2009; Roger Warner, "No Thanks to the State Department, the Last Remnant of the Vietnam War May Be About to End," *The Huntington Post*, 23 December 2009; Supalak Ganjanakhundee, "Laos Shuns Vang Pao's Plans," *The Nation*, 26 December 2009; Supalak Ganjanakhundee, "Laos Says No to Gen Vang Pao's Plea," *The Nation*, 25 December 2009.

process, as the recent protest by Hmong Christians and their subsequent massacre by Vietnamese government forces in the Dien Bien region in northern Vietnam demonstrates.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> "Vietnam: Ethnic Hmong in Mass Protest in Dien Bien," *BBC News*, 4 May 2011; "Many Vietnamese Hmong in Hiding," *BBC News*, 12 May 2011; "U.S. Probes Reports of Deaths After Hmong Protests in Vietnam," *Bloomberg News*, 6 May 2011; "The Establishment of Kingdom of Mong: Out of the Question," *QDND News*, 10 May 2011.

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