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Background Information on the Hmong People

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You asked for background information on the Hmong population. Additionally, you asked about the current status of federal legislation recognizing the contributions of Lao-Hmong veterans.

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Lao, Thailand, and Vietnam. For thousands of years, the Hmong have maintained a distinctive culture, including dress, oral traditions, and religion. They are a strongly independent people and highly value their autonomy. In pre-war Lao the Hmong lived high in the mountains practicing subsistence agriculture and had little contact with other people. As an ethnic minority in most areas where they have lived, the Hmong have often held a relatively low social status.¹ Hmong veterans are those who fought in Lao on behalf of the United States during the Vietnam War—also known as “Lao veterans.”

The Hmong and the Vietnam War

The Hmong generally supported the French occupation of Indochina from 1945-1954 because under the French the Hmong were a protected minority, and were mostly left alone to live their lives.² When the French withdrew in 1954, the Hmong found themselves under attack from the lowland Lao and from both the North and South Vietnamese. The United States, fearing a communist victory in Vietnam, had supported the French during the First Indochina War, and when the French withdrew supported South Vietnam.³ As the Vietnam conflict intensified in the early 1960s, the United States discovered that communist forces had entered Laos.⁴ In response, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sent agents to recruit the Hmong to help in the fight. The Hmong, who saw communism as a threat to their land and their autonomy, agreed to assist. The CIA established an air base at Long Cheng in northern Lao and selected Vang Pao to command the Hmong forces. This CIA-covert operation in Lao became known as the Secret War.

The United States relied heavily on Hmong soldiers from 1960-1975 to engage in direct combat, direct air strikes, rescue downed American flyers, fight behind enemy lines, and gather intelligence on the movements of North Vietnamese troops. During this time period, more than 35,000 Hmong soldiers, representing about 12 percent of the population, lost their lives

¹ Rashaan Meneses, “Hmong: An Endangered People,” UCLA International Institute, July 7, 2004. The article can be accessed at www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=12590.

² French Indochina included the current states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. After World War I a nationalist movement had formed in Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh. Ho Chi Minh formed a liberation movement known as the Viet Minh and battled first the Japanese during World War II and then the French until 1954. The war during the French occupation is known as the First Indochina War. Negotiations to end the conflict, known as the 1954 Geneva Accords, divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The territory north of the line was led by Ho Chi Minh with Hanoi as its capital and the southern part was led by Ngo Dinh Diem with Saigon as its capital. North Vietnam became a communist regime and Ho created a new band of guerilla fighters in the South known as the Viet Cong.

³ The United States subscribed to the domino theory, which posited that a communist victory in Vietnam might lead to communist victories in Lao, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

⁴ The Laos communists were known as the Pathet Lao. At the time, Laos had been declared neutral, but with a growing communist presence, the CIA saw it as the next front.

and many more were seriously injured and disabled.⁵ Overall, Hmong soldiers died at a rate ten times that of American soldiers in Vietnam. Tragically, most of the dead, however, were Hmong civilians who perished by the tens of thousands. Some estimates put the total number of Hmong lost during the Secret War at nearly 100,000, but given the circumstances of the Secret War, it is nearly impossible to know the exact number of Hmong killed.

In a report from 1969, then director of the CIA Richard Helms wrote that the Hmong had “borne a major share of the active fighting” against the Communists in Laos. After eight years of constant warfare, General Vang Pao had “been forced to use 13 and 14-year old children to replace his casualties.”⁶ Nevertheless, the Hmong continued to fight beside the U.S. for another six years. Mr. Helms and others note that the tenacity and effectiveness of the Hmong saved thousands of American lives.⁷ Not only did the Hmong suffer heavy losses during the 15-year war, they faced even greater hardship when the war ended and the United States withdrew its forces.

The Hmong in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War

For the Hmong, the end of the Vietnam War came on May 15, 1975, when the Pathet Lao overran the CIA’s mountain air base at Long Tieng.⁸ The U.S. had no coherent evacuation plan after 15 years of secret missions and had only enough aircraft to evacuate the Hmong officers and their family members. The CIA military records that had been left behind helped the new government track down Hmong soldiers who had fought with the Americans. Many of the Hmong with resources were able to escape to Thailand; however, most of the poor and uneducated stayed in Laos.

In 1977, the Lao government organized a massive troop movement against the Hmong, driving them from their homes. Hmong villages were burned, crops destroyed, and livestock killed.⁹ Tens of thousands of Hmong fled into the jungles and wound up as refugees in Thailand. It is believed that as many as a third of the Hmong population fled to Thailand at that time. During the exodus, countless people drowned in the Mekong River and hundreds of others died from starvation and disease. For example, by one account, a group of some 8,000 Hmong began the journey to Thailand, but only 2,500 arrived. The Lao military used conventional and chemical weapons against the Hmong, as well as terror bombing and mass rape. Of the Hmong that were captured, tens of thousands were sent to reeducation camps, which were essentially prisons and torture facilities. Many thousands died in these camps, as a result of torture, starvation, and illness. All told, between 1975 and 1978, an estimated 50,000 Hmong were killed in retribution for having assisted the Americans during the Secret War.¹⁰

Several thousand of the Hmong, primarily soldiers and their families, who escaped into the jungle took up arms against the Lao government. Although some of their raids were initially successful, the Lao military retaliated with heavy bombing and chemical weapons. Today perhaps 1,000 are still on the run in the jungles of Lao according to journalists and human rights activists who have recently traveled to the area. The jungle Hmong are believed to have staged occasional hit-and-run attacks

⁵ The Hmong population in Laos numbered between 300,000 and 400,000 before the war, with most estimates putting the total closer to 400,000.

⁶ Tim Weiner, “Gen. Vang Po’s Last War,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2008. The article can be accessed at www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html?pagewanted=all.

⁷ Lionel Rosenblatt, president emeritus of Refugees International, who has followed the plight of the Hmong for 30 years, notes that “The U.S. put the Hmong into this meat grinder, mostly to save U.S. soldiers from fighting and dying there. The U.S. had no compunction about putting Hmong into this role, which saved thousands of American lives.”

⁸ In 1973, the U.S. and North Vietnam signed an agreement in Paris to withdraw their military forces from Cambodia, Lao, and South Vietnam. To gain citizen’s support, the Pathet Lao in 1974 prepared an 18-point policy called the Program for Achieving Peace, Independence, Neutrality, Democracy, Unification, and Prosperity of the Kingdom of Lao. In 1975, the Pathet Lao took over Lao.

⁹ As a result of this systemic eradication of the Hmong people, the government of Lao has been accused of committing genocide.

¹⁰ Mai Xiong, Ed. D., “Hmong Journey for Freedom,” Hmong Studies, Delta College, Stockton, CA. The article can be accessed at www.hmongstudies.org/HmongJourneyforFreedom.html.

but, according to Amnesty International, their military capacity is all but depleted. The Hmong, however, are still being hunted and killed by Lao military units.¹¹ Several hundred thousand Hmong live in Laos today in cities and small villages, but essentially the Hmong have lost their land and their way of life.

Since 1975, many Hmong have been resettled in the United States, Australia, and other countries. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Hmong population in the U.S. numbers 260,076. The Hmong mostly live in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Alaska also has a sizeable Hmong population. According to the 2010 Census, 3,534 Hmong live in Alaska, primarily in Anchorage.¹²

Federal Legislation to Honor Lao-Hmong Veterans

In 2015, Senator Murkowski reintroduced the *Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act*, which would extend burial benefits in national cemeteries to Hmong and Lao Americans who served beside U.S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam War (S. 1358). The measure is currently pending in the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. The bill is being co-sponsored by Senators Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Al Franken (D-MN), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), among others.¹³ In the House, Representatives Jim Costa (D-CA) and Paul Cook (R-CA) also reintroduced the *Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act* (H.R. 2327). This measure is currently pending in the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.

¹¹ Tim Weiner, "Gen. Vang Po's Last War," *New York Times*, May 11, 2008.

¹² *Hmong Studies Journal*, Census Special Issue, Volume 13, Issue 2, 2010. The Journal can be accessed at www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/hsj-volume-1322012-2010-census-special-issue.html.

¹³ More information on S. 1358 is available at <http://www.murkowski.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/sponsoredlegislation>.