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Research Brief

TO: Representative Gabrielle LeDoux
FROM: Susan Haymes, Legislative Analyst
DATE: March 7, 2013
RE: Background Information on the Hmong People
LRS Report 13.254

You asked for background information on the Hmong population. Specifically, you wished to know the estimated number of Hmong people killed in Laos during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Additionally you wished to know the population of the Hmong in the United States and Alaska. You also asked how many states have adopted a Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day and the significance of the date May 15th.

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Laos, 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 Laos 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

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 in 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 help. The CIA established an air base at Long Cheng in northern Laos and selected Vang Pao to command the Hmong forces. This CIA-covert operation in Laos 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. More than 35,000 Hmong soldiers, representing about 12 percent of the population, lost their lives and many more were

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 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 Laos, 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.

seriously injured and disabled.⁵ Overall, Hmong soldiers died at a rate ten times that of American soldiers in Vietnam. 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 The Hmong, however, suffered heavy losses during the 15-year war and faced even greater hardship when the war ended and the United States withdrew its forces.

The Hmong in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War

The end came in May 1975.⁸ The U.S. had no coherent evacuation plan after 15 years of secret missions and had only enough aircraft to take the Hmong officers and their family members. The Pathet Lao overran the CIA’s mountain air base at Long Tieng, killing thousands of the 50,000 Hmong who had been left behind in retribution for having assisted the Americans during the Secret War.⁹ 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. 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, one group of some 8,000 people 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 more like prisons and torture facilities. Many thousands died in these camps, as a result of torture, starvation, and illness. All told, between 1975 and 1978, about 50,000 Hmong were killed.¹⁰

Several thousand of the Hmong, primarily soldiers and their families, who escaped into the jungle took up arms against the Laos 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 Laos according to journalists and human rights

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, Laos, 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 Laos.

⁹ As a result of this systemic eradication of the Hmong people, the government of Laos 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.

activists who have recently traveled to the area. The jungle Hmong are believed to have staged occasional hit-and-run attacks, 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

Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day

The U.S. government kept the Secret War in Laos confidential until 1997. On May 15, 1997, the U.S. government publically acknowledged that it had supported a prolonged air and ground campaign against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong from Laos, and in honor of the Hmong and other combat veterans from the Secret War, dedicated the Laos Memorial on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery. As a result, May 15th has become an historic date for Hmong veterans, since it represents the first time that the United States government officially and publicly recognized the contributions of these soldiers who fought alongside the Americans during the Vietnam War.¹³

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), California is the only state to have adopted a Hmong-American Veterans Memorial Day (ACR 182, 2003).¹⁴ In 2001 Congress passed a resolution urging the President to proclaim a National Lao-Hmong Recognition Day (HCR 88). The resolution finds that a number of states and cities have adopted July 22nd as Lao-Hmong Recognition Day, a day to remember and honor the Lao Hmong people for their service and sacrifices in the Secret War.¹⁵

In addition, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) recently introduced legislation that would allow 6,900 former Hmong soldiers living in the United States the right to be buried in national cemeteries (S. 200). In 2012, Senator Murkowski unsuccessfully attempted to similarly amend a defense bill that would have authorized the burial in a national cemetery of any U.S. citizen or legal resident who served in support of U.S. forces (S.3254). Similar legislation was introduced in the House in 2011 by Representative Jim Costa (D-CA), but never made it to the floor.

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 We include the proclamation from the ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery as Attachment A. More information can be accessed at www.arlingtoncemetery.net/laosmem.htm.

¹⁴ Angela Andrews, NCSL, can be reached at angela.andrews@ncsl.org.

¹⁵ The states of Minnesota and Pennsylvania, and the cities of St. Paul, MN, and Golden, CO, have adopted a Lao-Hmong Recognition Day on July 22nd.

DEDICATED TO
THE U.S. SECRET ARMY
IN THE KINGDOM OF LAOS
1961 – 1973

The story of this Memorial is a story of sacrifice and patriotic valor by American Advisors and Hmong and Lao combat soldiers in the jungles of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Hmong General Vang Pao's army, once considered among the best of U.S. allies, helped the Administrations of U.S. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon in the "secret" Lao Theater. The United States in its effort to combat communist insurgency in Laos, recruited, armed, and trained ethnic minorities. Advised by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), General Vang Pao's army of Hmong, Kmhmu, and Lao, gathered military intelligence, rescued downed U.S. air crews, protected U.S. Air Force navigational sites in Laos, and fought North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap's ever increasing forces to a standstill in Laos for a decade.

When, after the fall of Laos, the communists took control, they launched a genocidal campaign to punish or eliminate those who allied with the United States, particularly those who had served in the U.S. Secret Army. Tens of thousands of Hmong escaped across the Mekong River to Thailand and refugee camps. From there, former soldiers and their families eventually were resettled in the United States. Once here, the Hmong adjustment proved difficult, but few Americans knew of their historical alliance with the U.S. adding to their resettlement problems.

Because the campaigns waged by General Vang Pao and General Giap were secret, most Americans knew little, if anything, of the secret war in Laos. Not until almost 20 years after falling to the communists did U.S. Government officials publicly admit the existence and role of the "U.S. Secret Army" in the "secret" Lao Theater of Operation of the Vietnam War. Appearing before Congress, in 1994, the Honorable [William E. Colby](#), former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, talked of the "heroism and effectiveness of the Hmong struggle" and the critical role and sacrifice of the Secret Army.

In part, Colby said:

"For 10 years, Vang Pao's soldiers held the growing North Vietnamese forces to approximately the same battlelines they held in 1962. And significantly for Americans, the 70,000 North Vietnamese engaged in Laos were not available to add to the forces fighting Americans and South Vietnamese in South Vietnam."

After Ambassador Colby's acknowledgment, a handful of Americans who knew well the Hmong alliance with the U.S. felt it timely to seek official U.S. recognition for the soldiers of the Secret Army and their American Advisors who died in Laos. Mr. Grant McClure, a former U.S. Army Advisor to the Montagnards, became the moving force behind the idea of a permanent Memorial at Arlington to nationally and publicly honor the uncommon sacrifices of the Secret Army. Mr. McClure's efforts brought together in common cause former CIA Station Chiefs, Vietnam Veterans, Members of Congress, and others who served in civilian and military roles, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Wangyee Vang, founder of Lao Veterans of America, Inc.

Finally, after discussions with officials of the U.S. Government and the Lao Veterans of America, whose members number some 55,000 former soldiers and their families of the Secret Army, agreement on a Living Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery was reached.

On May 15, 1997, some 3,000 veterans of General Vang Pao's army – Hmong and Lao – dressed in jungle camouflage fatigues, flight suits, nurses uniforms stood at attention on the Mall in Washington, D.C. near the Vietnam Wall. Facing them were current Members of Congress, former U.S. Ambassadors, and the CIA Station Chiefs under whom they had served during the time of the "secret war" in Laos. A Congressional citation was read. CIA Station Chiefs paid tribute to the extraordinary contributions of General Vang Pao and his brave forces in the fight for freedom in Southeast Asia and assisted in handing out the Vietnam Veterans National Medal.

The next day, General Vang Pao and the remnants of his army, again wearing camouflage fatigues, assembled at Arlington National Cemetery. Six deep, they stood at attention for the dedication of the Memorial Monument – a small stone topped with a copper plaque, acknowledging the "secret war" in Laos – and the Hmong, Lao, and American Advisors who valiantly served freedom's cause in the jungles of Southeast Asia and, in so doing, died in the Lao Theater in the Vietnam War. They will now be forever known and remembered.

Contributed in Loving Respect, September 1999 by Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt,
Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, Author of Tragic Mountains: The Hmong,
The Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos 1942 – 1992.

In Memory of Legions Lost and the Soldiers of the Secret War in Laos.

We stand in tribute of forgotten men...for their sacrifice, courage
valor and honor. We honor them by this living memorial...starkly
beautiful in its simplicity, for it stands defiantly alone, as did those
soldiers in their seasons of death. It will serve as a poignant reminder
of our battlefield allies, and is a tribute long overdue to proud Human
endeavor...courage and valor in a long war lost in the unfulfilled hopes
for Southeast Asia.

*As the fallen leaves of Autumn
in unregimented ranks,
Countless unremembered soldiers
rest...eternally.
Let us now praise forgotten men...
and some there be,
Which have no memorial;*

*Who have perished, as though
They had never been.
But they served, they died;
for cause and by happenstance...
Expended in the hopes for Southeast Asia,
and will forever be remembered,
Mourned for their sacrifice.*

*If by weeping I could change
the course of events,
My tears would pour down ceaselessly
for a thousand Autumns.*

Thursday, May 15, 1997
Salute to Lao/Hmong Patriots
& their American Advisors
Arlington National Cemetery