

Why Are the Hmong in America?

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Like their American counterparts, many Hmong people in the United States do not really understand why the Hmong are here. Most Hmong young people know that they are here because of fighting that occurred in Laos, but do they really understand the monumental sacrifice their people made to help the United States? And do non-Hmong Americans understand their debt of gratitude to the Hmong people? Given the misunderstandings I have seen on both sides, I think it would be helpful to review a little history.

In the late 1950s, southeast Asia, including Laos, was viewed as an important region to the West. With the fall of China to communism and the rise of Communist rebellion in Vietnam, the US sent elite soldiers, the Green Berets, to train Hmong guerrillas to oppose the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao communists of Laos. Though the Hmong had no desire to play political roles for other nations, they loved freedom and know that there would be little freedom under Communism. They were threatened by the intrusion of North Vietnamese troops into Laos, so the U.S. then encouraged them to fight and provided training and weapons. With CIA assistance, General Vang Pao became the leader of a secret army of 9,000 Hmong men in 1961. Laos was officially neutral as the Vietnam War broke out, and the US had signed an international agreement, the Geneva Accords, intended to keep Laos neutral and prevent fighting there. In reality, this agreement gave the Communists the upper hand, for they flagrantly violated the agreement. Responding to the presence of active North Vietnamese troops in Laos, the US tried to oppose them without appearing to violate the Geneva Accords by secretly recruiting freedom-loving locals to fight the Communist -- and these freedom-loving locals were the Hmong.

Most Americans thought that Laos was not part of the Vietnam War, but Laos played a critical role, especially since supplies from North Vietnam to its warring troops primarily moved along the Ho Chi Minh trail that passed through Laos. Much fighting occurred along this trail and the surrounding regions in Laos. But our military efforts there were not publicized to avoid international criticism. So we pretended that nothing was happening in Laos, while North

Vietnamese troops were actively helping the Pathet Lao take over the country, and while thousands of poorly-equipped Hmong were fighting a war against terrible odds. Many Hmong lives would be lost in the unpublicized battles of Laos.

The Hmong apparently were told that they could bravely fight for the U.S. because the United States would always be there to protect them should local communists turn on the Hmong. It was a relationship of trust, but Hmong trust in the US would be sadly misplaced.

In 1963 the Kennedy Administration had the CIA increase the secret Hmong army in Laos to 20,000 soldiers. Significant battles occurred as the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao occupied major areas in northern Laos in 1964. Meanwhile, the US began a secret air war in Laos. By 1968, US pilots would be doing 300 dangerous sorties a day to battle many thousands of Communist troops. Hmong soldiers rescued many American pilots who were shot down. Sometimes dozens of Hmong would die in order to rescue one American pilot. Over 100 Hmong pilots were recruited and trained by the US, and they ran mission after mission until they were all killed. Hmong courage seemed to know no bounds in the fight for freedom. But sadly, much of the fighting seems to have been in vain.

Years after the war, when the infamous "Pentagon Papers" were published, shocked Americans and Hmong patriots would learn that much of the war was fought by the United States under secret rules that we agreed to that almost guaranteed the fall of South Vietnam to the Communists. Just as the Hmong were told to only fight defensively and not to take steps that could directly throw the North Vietnamese out of their country, so too were U.S. actions continually hampered by rules of engagement, apparently orchestrated by Robert S. McNamara, the US Secretary of Defense at the time. For example, US pilots were not allowed to attack Viet Cong anti-aircraft installations until they were fully functional. Though hotly debated, many are convinced that the war could have been won by cutting off supplies to the North Vietnamese and hitting them in the regions where they were most vulnerable -- something that was forbidden by our rules of engagement. Instead, American soldiers died unnecessarily in jungle skirmishes that gave an upper hand to those familiar with the territory.

The loss of 60,000 American lives for a no-win war in Vietnam was a tragedy to the huge nation of America, but it was a relatively small percentage of the nation compared to the loss the Hmong people suffered. In 1969, at the time when Congress first learned of our secret war in Laos, about 18,000 Hmong soldiers had already been killed in battle died, and many women and children had died as well. The Hmong were taking a great risk in boldly fighting for the United States, trusting that we would stand by them. But in 1973, the U.S. began to pull out of Laos, leaving the Hmong on their own to fight thousands of North Vietnamese troops in Laos. By 1975, Laos had fallen completely into Communist hands, and the lives of all Hmong people who helped fight the Communists were in jeopardy. More than 100,000 Hmong fled to Thai refugee camps. Many would be killed along the way, especially when crossing the Mekong River to get to Thailand. An estimated 30,000 Hmong would be killed by Communist forces while trying to reach Thailand. Over 100,000 Hmong people died as a result of the war, and today nearly every Hmong family in the US has terrible tales of loss and tragedy relating to the war.

After taking over Laos in 1975, the Pathet Lao Communists stated that they would wipe out the Hmong. A Vietnamese broadcast apparently called for genocide against them. From 1976 to 1979, there were credible reports of chemical warfare used against Hmong villages. The world tried to ignore these reports, and some influential voices in the United States tried to discredit the evidence, claiming that the "yellow rain" that had been used to kill Hmong people was just natural bee feces, not a chemical toxin. By the time overwhelming evidence had been gathered to shatter the "bee feces" theory, the media no longer seemed interested in exploring charges of genocide by Communist forces.

The United States, recognizing the sacrifice made by Hmong soldiers to fight for the U.S., began accepting Hmong refugees into the United States in December of 1975. By 1990, about 100,000 refugees had entered the United States. Today approximately 250,000 Hmong are in the U.S., and a similar number still live in Laos. Over 5 million Hmong people are in Southern China, also under Communist rule.

Writing to an American who was confused about the Hmong people, Jack Austin Smith, a Vietnam Veteran and a retired career soldier, wrote the following in 1996 (quoted from his e-mail to me, with permission):

The war in Vietnam was fought on several fronts and I served in two them. The main American battle ground was in the Southern end of South Vietnam. In order for the North Vietnamese forces to fight us there, it was necessary for their supplies and troops to go through Laos and Cambodia on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Laos was controlled by a Pro-Communist Government at that time. Therefore America was not allowed to have any forces on the ground, although we were allowed to bomb and attack North Vietnamese troops with our aerial forces. About 99% of the combat forces on the ground were Hmong irregulars who were persuaded by Americans to forget about being neutral, and to fight the N. Vietnamese regulars (not relatively poorly trained Viet Cong guerrilla forces). We supplied air cover, but every combat trooper knows aircraft can't take and hold ground. We depended on the Hmongs to do this. Without modern arms, without medical help.

After the fall of Saigon we pulled out of Southeast Asia and left the Hmongs to continue the fight without air support. When we left, the Hmong had to fight both the Laotians and the N. Vietnamese. They could not fight tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft with rifles. A great many Hmongs were slaughtered in their villages. Many were slaughtered at airfields where they waited for evacuation planes that never came. A few were able to fight every foot of the way across Laos and cross the Mekong River into refugee camps in Thailand where they were further mistreated by rather corrupt UN and Thai officials. Out of a estimated 3,000,000 prewar Hmong population less than 200,000 made it to safety. One other ill informed or stupid writer said "they were all gone" meaning, I guess, that the combat Hmongs were all dead, they are wrong. Most of the survivors are in Australia, France and here among us.

Now I don't know about those heroes who have never heard a shot fired in anger, but I am embarrassed that my country so mislead these people. The Hmongs gave up literally everything for us: their country, their homes, their peaceful way of life, most of their families, everything that we would cherish. We promised them our continued support and then we bugged out.

You mentioned having relatives who fought in Vietnam and I hope they all survived. However their chances would have been much less if the Hmongs hadn't intercepted over 50% of the N. Vietnamese troops and supplies. If you truly loved your relatives, you should be grateful for the Hmongs' sacrifices.

The Vietnam War and subsequent genocidal actions shattered so many lives and families. Every Hmong family in the United States was violated in some way, often with the tragic loss of loved ones. I have heard so many stories of sorrow and loss, the stories of desperate parents trying to hide their children from murderous soldiers, sometimes overdosing their children with opium to keep them from crying and revealing their hiding place. I have heard stories of trying to cross the Mekong River and having loved ones drown or be shot. For those who escaped torture and death in Laos, there would yet be tales of gruesome life in neglected refugee camps, tales of families split up by careless bureaucrats, and tales of shock and confusion as penniless refugees are dropped off in the strange world of America, where the citizens have no idea who the Hmong people were and sometimes viewed them as enemies. I can understand the sorrow of the old people, who sometimes stare out the window and seem immobilized by the tragedy of their loss, yearning for the once peaceful and happy days in the hills of northern Laos. But I cannot understand the ignorance of many Americans, who have not bothered to learn who these people are and why they deserved to be brought to the United States. They bled and died for us. They saved hundreds of American lives at great loss to them and their families.

We used the Hmong people and their freedom-loving courage, and suddenly abandoned them to genocidal tyrants, keeping their sacrifices largely secret from the American people. Ours is a debt of gratitude that remains incompletely expressed. And for today's Hmong-Americans, yours is a legacy of courage and valor that I hope will inspire you to stand for the highest of human values and bring further honor to your people and your ancestors.