

Warlord

(from *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos*)

by [Keith Quincy](#)

Abstract

This is Chapter Eight (Warlord) of *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos*, scheduled for publication in March 2000. The chapter chronicles the events that led to Vang Pao's rise to commander, and warlord, of the second military region. It also describes the political machine he created, a vast system of patronage and graft designed to co-opt clan notables (many of them potential political rivals) and, if this failed, a program of assassination for trouble-makers. Vang Pao also acquired wives from various clans to forge ties to clan leaders. To induce ordinary Hmong to support the war effort he spawned, with CIA money and sponsorship, a massive system of welfare that would eventually make more than a hundred thousand Hmong dependent on him for their survival.

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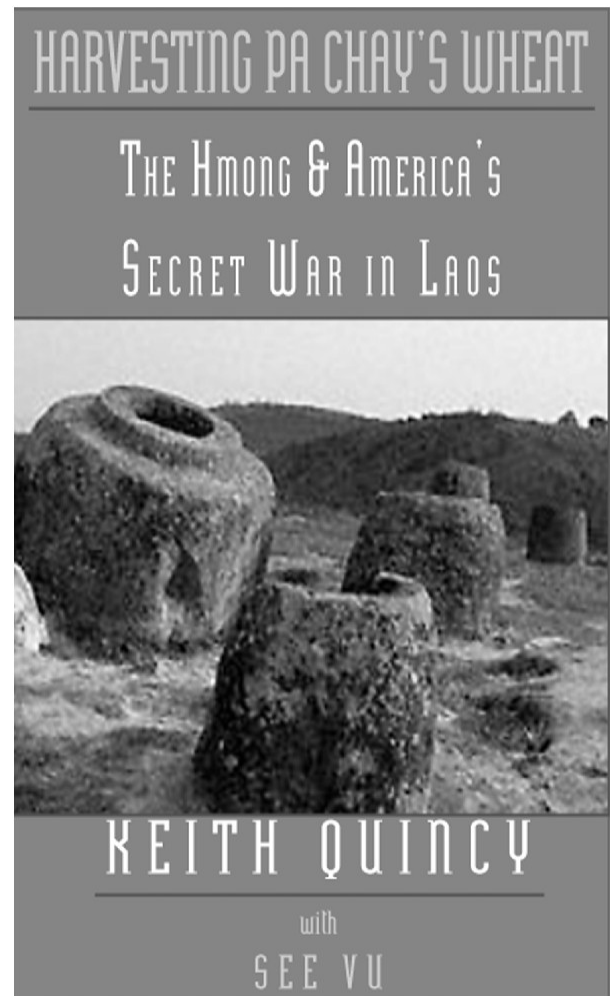
The Coalition Collapses

[1]

The 1962 Geneva accords obliged America to withdraw all military personnel from Laos. Nearly eight hundred individuals, including military attachés, advisors to the RLA, MAAG staff, and the members of the White Star teams, packed up and left the country.[\[1\]](#) Even the White Star's new logistics center at Sam Thong was abandoned with supplies still on warehouse shelves and in dispensary cabinets. Hmong quickly swept over the facility and carried everything away.[\[2\]](#)

[2]

Washington also ordered the CIA out of the country. The entire Vientiane station moved to Bangkok, but two of Lair's agents, Tony Poe and Vinton Lawrence, illegally remained



behind at Long Cheng along with a PARU team. Lair was too high-profile to stay behind, so he set up a temporary headquarters for his paramilitary operation at Nong Khai, a Thai village across the Mekong from Vientiane. The location kept Lair close to his Hmong, but it lacked security. Local villagers and complete strangers wandered into his facility. Lair finally transferred his headquarters to Udorn Air Base in Thailand. The CIA owned property there, a rundown wooden bungalow just off the huge concrete runway constructed by the US Strategic Air command in the early 1950s. The bungalow was designated with a simple sign as building AB-1.

[3]

Lair moved into AB-1 and set up shop along with Roy Moffit who was in charge of CIA paramilitary operations in southern Laos. For the rest of the war AB-1 would remain the headquarters for all CIA paramilitary operations in Laos, though it would be torn down and rebuilt in 1967. Friendly congressmen on tour continually responded with disbelief when shown the dilapidated bungalow and told it was the nerve center for a major paramilitary operation in Laos. Over Lair's objections (he liked things small and simple) the CIA had AB-1 torn down and replaced with a two-story office building to better fit the image of a high-powered operation. [\[3\]](#)

[4]

In the beginning, Lair's work at AB-1 was circumscribed. He was not allowed to ship arms and supplies to the Hmong or sponsor more training. However, Washington did authorize humanitarian aid for the Hmong and this gave Lair plenty to do. He channeled funds into Edgar Buell's refugee relief program and oversaw the logistics of getting supplies into the field. It wasn't the same as fighting a war, but at least it kept the Hmong from starving.

[5]

North Vietnam honored the Geneva agreement by infiltrating additional troops into Laos to augment the nearly twenty thousand Pathet Lao already in the field.^{4} Vang Pao's intelligence network reported a steady stream of North Vietnamese trucks carrying troops and supplies down Route 6 from Vietnam onto the Plain of Jars. American Voodoo jets, high-flying twin-engine reconnaissance planes, also confirmed the presence of the truck convoys in their aerial photographs.^{5} By the fall of 1962, the North Vietnamese had expanded their presence in Laos to ten thousand men.

[6]

One reason for the buildup was the failure of the Pathet Lao to bring Kong-Lê into their fold. He took his neutralism seriously and was openly critical of the Pathet Lao's slavish dependence on the North Vietnamese, calling them kap kap (the Lao expression for toads) because of their penchant for aping the North Vietnamese obsession with digging trenches.^{6} Kong-Lê had forty-five hundred troops under his direct command, distributed over the Plain of Jars, in the Ban Ban Valley, and at Xieng Khouangville. Another fifty-five hundred were scattered throughout central Laos in small garrisons. Once Hanoi realized it could not count on these troops and might very well have to face them in combat, the decision was made to dramatically expand the presence of the NVA.

[7]

In March 1963 a sudden escalation in clashes between Neutralists and Pathet Lao forces began to unravel the ten-month-old coalition government. Pathet Lao anti-aircraft guns shot down two American transport planes, killing two U.S. pilots, attempting to deliver supplies to the Neutralists. This incident caused the Kennedy administration to

reconsider the feasibility of a coalition. Even Souvanna Phouma, who had so often championed the coalition idea, began to question its viability, especially after receiving confirmation of a buildup of North Vietnamese forces in his country. {7}

[8]

In the end it was the communists who scuttled the coalition by assassinating two of Kong-Lê's top officers. The Neutralists retaliated, gunning down Quinim Pholsena on the front steps of his Vientiane residence. A former librarian and part-time radical, Quinim had jumped on the Pathet Lao bandwagon and wangled the post of foreign minister in the coalition government. Outspoken in his support of the communists, he made an ideal target.

[9]

Not wanting the revolution to lose a second hero, and with memories still green of his year in jail after the collapse of the last coalition government, Souphanouvong vacated his post as deputy prime minister and fled to his cave headquarters in Sam Neua. The other communist deputies soon joined him, returning like salmon to their natal stream.

[10]

With the coalition government no more, the Pathet Lao stepped up military action, especially against Neutralist forces. For months the communists had been cutting back on the food and military supplies going to Kong-Lê. Now they ceased delivering anything at all. In mid-April, NVA and Pathet Lao units assaulted all Neutralist strongholds on the Plain of Jars. Believing Kong-Lê's army would be destroyed without outside support, Kennedy authorized covert deliveries of supplies to the Neutralists and directed the CIA to do what it could to save them from annihilation.

Back In Business

[11]

Bill Lair used the directive as a pretext for reopening the weapons pipeline to his Hmong. With support from the Thai military, he secured a two-story building at Udorn Air Base to warehouse supplies and weapons. The building would become the principal supply headquarters for all U.S. paramilitary operations in Laos for the rest of the war.

[12]

With weapons again arriving at Long Cheng, Lair persuaded Vang Pao to conduct a series of diversionary actions on the Plain of Jars to draw the communists away from the Neutralists. Vang Pao went a step further and ordered Hmong to fight alongside the Neutralists garrisoned at Lat Houang and Ban Ban Valley.

[13]

The Hmong at Lat Houang came directly from Long Cheng and were battle-tested. The Hmong at Ban Ban were only members of a local ADC. Vang Pao airdropped arms and supplies to the irregulars and sent them a leader, one of his best officers, Major Chong Shoua Yang. Over the next year Chong Shoua hardened the ADC into a formidable guerrilla unit that kept the Pathet Lao out of Ban Ban Valley.

[14]

Despite the help, Kong-Lê remained suspicious of Vang Pao and the Americans. To win him over, Washington recalled CIA agent Jack Mathews from Africa. Prior to his Africa assignment, Mathews had worked closely with Kong-Lê,

supporting his 2nd battalion in the field. The two men had parted on good terms. Mathews spent three weeks with Kong-Lê on the plain, time enough to secure an agreement from Kong-Lê to establish a permanent network to receive arms and ammunition from the U.S. The logistics support, plus the intercession of Vang Pao's guerrillas, forced a stalemate that saved the Neutralists, at least for the moment. A fly-over by a high altitude U-2 spy plane equipped with high resolution cameras revealed the communists were busily expanding their logistics on the Plain of Jars, preparing for something big. [\[8\]](#)

[15]

Over the next ten months fighting was sporadic. Kong-Lê's garrisons held, but three of Vang Pao's momentum sites were overrun and lost. [\[9\]](#) The communists had their own setbacks. Hanoi was using Route 7 to move troops and supplies to NVA garrisons onto the Plain of Jars. Bill Lair decided to close the road down. In August 1963, he sent in PARU demolition specialists to supervise the operation. The Thai organized twelve platoons of elite Hmong troops and deployed them along the road at strategic passes and bridges. Each platoon dug ten holes to receive cratering charges. The charges, plus C-4 explosives, were airdropped to each platoon by Tony Poe.

[16]

The demolition job was a huge success. Along one stretch explosions blew the road entirely off the side of a mountain. [\[10\]](#) The flow of troops and supplies to the plain slowed to a trickle. Hanoi rushed NVA labor battalions in to clear away the debris, reconstruct the road, and rebuild bridges.

Capturing Sam Neua City

[17]

It would take five months for North Vietnamese work crews to finish rebuilding Route 7, giving Vang Pao the breathing space to hit the communists further north. When Tony Poe first signed on with Momentum, his job was to establish dirt airstrips northeast of the Plain of Jars so STOL aircraft could deliver arms and supplies to Hmong volunteers. Poe was now doing the same thing again, but on a much larger scale. For months he had been expanding the Momentum network, having Hmong clear mountain landing sites throughout northern Laos, many of them behind enemy lines.

[18]

Air America pilots flew PARU teams and CIA agents to many of these distant locations to initiate new guerrilla organizations, reinvigorate those that had been allowed to languish, and train volunteers for ADCs. Poe used helicopters from Thailand to ferry Hmong troops to the new airstrips so they could launch surprise assaults against distant Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese posts. The most ambitious of these assaults was an attack on the Pathet Lao stronghold at Sam Neua City.

[19]

While crisscrossing the northern highlands searching for potential landing strips, Poe had stumbled on the remnants of former RLA battalions thought to have been destroyed when the Pathet Lao took over Sam Neua Province in late 1960. The soldiers were concealed in highland villages, and survived by raiding Pathet Lao supply stores. To get the soldiers back in uniform and working for him, Vang Pao promoted their commander, Major Khamsao Keovilay, to the post of military subdivision commander for Sam Neua and deputy governor of

the province.

[20]

Recruitment through promotion was standard procedure in Hmong politics. Touby had used the technique to raise guerrilla units quickly. Loyalty was to clan, and only clan chieftains had the ability to call up hundreds of volunteers for military service almost overnight. The drawback was that clan nabobs were politicians and not warriors. Giving them command over troops risked bungled campaigns due to incompetent leadership.

[21]

Khamsao was a trained officer and had survived for nearly three years behind enemy lines, so Vang Pao was not putting a rank amateur in a top leadership slot. The day would come, however, when he would be so desperate for new recruits to fill his depleted ranks that he would give literally anyone—Hmong, Khmu, or Lao—a command position if he could deliver enough warm bodies for duty.

[22]

Poe airdropped supplies and ammunition to Khamsao and helped with the training of his troops. Soon Poe had three battalions combat-ready for a surprise assault on the communist bastion at Sam Neua City. Vang Pao contributed two Hmong companies to the force and added a fourth battalion commanded by one of his best officers, and brother-in-law, Major Sao Ly.

[23]

The campaign to take Sam Neua City began with a diversionary action. Three of the four battalions overran a Pathet Lao garrison north of the target, then circled east around it.

Pathet Lao troops hurried out of the provincial capital to meet the challenge. With the capital only lightly defended, the fourth battalion struck from the west and took possession of city.

[24]

It was a brilliant operation that caught the communists totally off-guard. By contrast, the RLA had nothing to show for itself but a dismal season of military defeats, reason enough to belittle Vang Pao's victory. But since former RLA battalions took part in the campaign, the armchair generals in Vientiane chose to celebrate it as their own. For a brief moment Vang Pao was a national hero. The RLA general staff promoted him to general.

[25]

What went unnoticed by the RLA's top brass, but not by Lair and the other CIA case officers on the scene, was that a major factor in the campaign's success was the exemplary performance of Major Sao Ly who had commanded the only Hmong battalion in the operation. Having followed the major's career with some interest, Lair was convinced Sao Ly had the potential to become another Vang Pao. Lair talked to his PARU teams about grooming Sao Ly to take over for Vang Pao, if he were killed.

[26]

Vang Pao was furious when he learned of the plan. A short time later, Sao Ly was murdered by his own troops. According to one of the top PARU officers at Long Cheng, Vang Pao was not "displeased by the turn of events."[\[11\]](#)

Another Coup

[27]

With praise of Vang Pao stinging his ears, Phoumi yearned to score a brilliant victory of his own. In November 1963, he launched a multi-battalion campaign in the upper panhandle. The CIA had advised against it, but Phoumi arrogantly ignored the counsel. The offensive began with a roar and ended in a squeak.

[28]

Things went well at first. Phoumi's battalions pushed right to the edge of North Vietnam's border, with Pathet Lao units in the area unexpectedly pulling back, giving ground. Phoumi crowed victory until three NVA battalions suddenly materialized to maul his troops. Phoumi rushed in reinforcements. The North Vietnamese hit them hard and sent them reeling. Pathet Lao troops waiting in the wings reappeared to savage the retreating RLA. For Phoumi it was one more humiliation in an already long list of embarrassments. [\[12\]](#)

[29]

Except for Phoumi's botched offensive, the RLA's top generals stayed out of the field. They had other fish to fry. Souvanna Phouma had recently met on the Plain of Jars with representatives from the Neutralists, Rightists, and Pathet Lao to see what could be done to bring an end to the fighting. He thought he had come up with an idea that would be attractive to both the Neutralists and communists: move the seat of government away from Vientiane's nesting ground of Rightists cliques to Luang Prabang and start again from scratch. To his astonishment the Pathet Lao blustered, complained, and generally dug in their heels, revealing they had no interest in a ceasefire under any conditions. The prime minister was stunned, then completely disheartened by their intransigence. He announced his intention to resign.

[{13}](#)

[30]

Sensing a power vacuum forming, the Rightists contemplated a coup. But this time there was dissension in their ranks. Resentment against Phoumi had reached a boiling point. As one Lao politician put it, "none of us with property and servants can be deemed wholly above corruption, but Phoumi . . . has become extremely greedy." [{14}](#) Phoumi controlled the narcotics trade in Laos and even ran an opium den in Vientiane, a seedy ramshackle building that handled 150 addicted smokers a day. Narcotics netted him about a million dollars a year. Breaking with the Lao tradition of spreading graft among the ruling elite, he shared very little of the drug profits with the other Rightists. General Ouane Rattikone, who managed Phoumi's sprawling opium administration, received only two hundred dollars a month. And General Kouprasith Abhay, who commanded MR V where most of Phoumi's drug deals were made, was cut out of the drug profits entirely. [{15}](#)

[31]

In the past, resentment against Phoumi was held in check by the looming figure of Phoumi's cousin, Thai strongman Sarit Thanarat. Sarit commanded the Thai armed forces and had once offered to commit Thai troops to help Phoumi defeat his political enemies. Fear of Sarit had always been Phoumi's trump card, but Sarit had recently died. Phoumi was now on his own.

[32]

General Abhay moved quickly to take over the government, elbow Phoumi aside, and co-opt his drug empire. His co-conspirator was General Siho Lamphouthacoul, a man from Abhay's hometown and head of the national police,

reorganized in 1961 as a praetorian guard to protect Phoumi from his political enemies. By pirating the best units from the RLA, Siho had shaped the police into a formidable military force, which he advertised by sending his police against Nong Boualo, a Pathet Lao bastion close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. RLA battalions had assaulted the stronghold many times before and were humiliated on each occasion. Siho's police units routed the communists within a few days. [{16}](#)

[33]

During the evening of April 18, 1964, on Abhay's orders Siho sent two of his battalions into Vientiane to occupy the airport, radio station, and the national bank. His troops arrested Souvanna Phouma, all pro-Neutralist officials, and numerous French diplomats. For added effect, some of Siho's soldiers looted Kong-Lê's Vientiane residence. With the capital secure, Abhay called for a special convocation of the national assembly to force a settlement that would fill the cabinet with Rightists. Phoumi was never consulted, nor was a place made for him in the new government. [{17}](#)

[34]

U.S. Ambassador Leonard Unger was out of the country at the time, meeting in Saigon with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Unger rushed back to Vientiane and, in the company of the French ambassador, sought out the prime minister at his residence. Rightist soldiers in battle fatigues, their rifles slightly raised to appear menacing, stood guard at the house. The soldiers informed the two diplomats that the prime minister was not receiving visitors.

[35]

Unger checked if there were guards posted at the sides of the two story white stucco mansion. There weren't. He had

his driver take the car to the side of the house. Unger shouted the prime minister's name. Souvanna Phouma appeared on his French balcony and the two shouted back and forth for several minutes, Unger assuring Souvanna Phouma of America's support, and the prime minister expressing his gratitude. The French ambassador found the exchange quite amusing; "Ah," he exclaimed, "diplomacy à la Romeo and Juliet."[\[18\]](#)

[36]

Once Unger confronted him with a threat to cut off all American aid, Abhay agreed to return Souvanna to power, but only on condition that Rightist officers, about eighty in all, be placed in positions of authority. Souvanna accepted the condition and resumed as prime minister with the intention of reasserting his political independence. However, being surrounded daily by newly appointed Rightists had its effect. Only a month after returning to power Souvanna Phouma announced plans to merge the Neutralist and Royal armies.

[37]

Conspicuously, Kong-Lê would not receive a position in the merged army's high command. It was an obvious maneuver to end the military independence of the Neutralists and subordinate them to the authority of the Rightists. When Kong-Lê did not protest the proposal, it was understood on all sides that for all practical purposes he had gone over to the Rightists. In protest, several hundred left-leaning Neutralist soldiers bolted to the Pathet Lao.

[38]

While the political center had been moribund for some time, there was at least its prostrate body to fight over, giving life, if only flickering, to neutralism and the coalition idea. It kept minds active hatching schemes to manipulate

ideas for political advantage. And it kept people talking, even if they were only shouting at each other. Most important, it gave both sides an option besides armed conflict, an incentive to talk as well as to fight.

[39]

The communists had allowed Kong-Lê a token presence on the Plain of Jars because neutralism discomfited the Rightists and kept the door ajar for coalition politics. Now with Kong-Lê in the Rightist' camp, he ceased to serve any useful purpose, and posed a military threat. In a joint operation, NVA and Pathet Lao battalions assaulted the Neutralist strongholds at Khang Khay, Phong Savan, Ban Ban Valley, and Xieng Khouangville. To avoid annihilation, Kong-Lê withdrew his forces to the western edge of the plain.

The War Takes A Nasty Turn

[40]

A prime target of the communist offensive was the Hmong ADC militia at Ban Ban Valley, commanded by Chong Shoua Yang. For nearly a year Chong Shoua had frustrated communist efforts to raze the Neutralist garrison at Ban Ban by holding the high ground, principally the mountain villages of Pha Ka and Phou Nong. The Pathet Lao repeatedly tried to dislodge the ADC from the two villages, but on each occasion fell short. During the April 1964 offensive, the communists went after Chong Shoua with four battalions, three of them NVA, unleashing a deadly artillery and mortar barrage that tore the two mountain villages apart.

[41]

Chong Shoua retreated, leading his militia and what was left

of the villagers, south toward nearby mountains. Shells continued to drop from the sky, striking not only Pha Ka and Phou Nong but blasting several other villages nearby. These civilians also fled for their lives. The flood of refugees quickly exceeded fourteen thousand, fleeing in three separate groups. In the past the communists had not bothered to waste bullets on fleeing refugees, but this time they kept up the harassment, driving them on.

[42]

One group of six thousand was hounded by a small force, then driven up into the highlands and herded into a bowl-like depression. Waiting for them was a much larger force of four hundred NVA already in position around the edges of the basin. The harassing force pulled back to give the Hmong a false sense of security. The four hundred communists lying in wait watched patiently as the refugees below made camp and tended to their children.

[43]

By midnight most of the refugees were asleep. Suddenly, eyes popped open and heads jerked at the whoosh of shells exiting mortar tubes. Dozens of Hmong had already begun to scatter when the missiles exploded, kicking bodies into the air. Bullets from AK-47s tore into the encampment. The refugees ran blindly in the dark from one side of the basin to the other, trying to find an escape route, each time rushing directly into another deadly rifle barrage.

[44]

Above, on the rim, an order was barked out in Vietnamese. Soldiers dashed down the hillsides, screaming like banshees, most running at full tilt but a few on the steeper inclines sliding by the seat of their pants over slick limestone to get at the Hmong. When they reached the basin the NVA troops

pushed into the confusion of bodies, tossing grenades into clumps of people, shooting until their magazines were empty, then drawing their knives to slash at arms and shoulders and stab at stomachs and backs. A few soldiers picked up small children and swung them like sacks, bashing their heads against rocks.

[45]

During the height of the killing, a few Hmong discovered an escape route and called out to the others. There was a massed rush to get away. The Vietnamese went after them in the darkness, slitting the throats of some stragglers, disemboweling others, and shooting yet others in the leg so they could be left and finished off at leisure later. Bodies littered the refugees' escape route, life still ebbing from a few who had survived a stabbing or bullet wound, groaning in pain and pleading for someone to help them. By early morning the Vietnamese gave up the chase. Sides heaving, their black pajama uniforms encrusted with blood, they were finally exhausted from their butchery. Nearly thirteen hundred Hmong, including women and children, lay dead, carved up like livestock in a slaughterhouse. [\[19\]](#)

[46]

The Vietnamese took two hundred survivors prisoner. The rest of the approximately forty-five hundred Hmong who had escaped the carnage and eluded capture walked forty miles to Muong Meo, a village with an airstrip that had become a magnet for thousands of other Hmong displaced by the communist offensive on the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars. More than twenty thousand refugees were already assembled, waiting to be evacuated. Air America transport planes arrived the next day and ferried refugees nonstop to Vang Pao's SGU training camp at Muong Cha.

[47]

For the Hmong the war had taken a nasty turn.

Rapprochement With Kong-Lê

[48]

During his retreat Kong-Lê had set up temporary headquarters at Ban Khong on the plain's southwestern rim. He would soon establish permanent headquarters a few miles northwest at Muong Soui where Neutralists troops were already garrisoned. Mung Soui was next to Route 7 and had an airfield, making it easy to resupply by both land and air. And at this moment supplies were foremost on Kong-Lê's mind.

[49]

Lulled into complacency by Hmong victories in Sam Neua Province and the demolition of Route 7, the U.S. had slowed the delivery of provisions to Kong-Lê's forces. The frayed uniforms of his troops were in tatters, their worn-out combat boots splitting at the seams. Some of his units were already out of ammunition. Kong-Lê pleaded for supplies and reinforcements to keep his army intact. While Vientiane air-shuttled a thousand Neutralists garrisoned near the capital to the edge of the plain to fortify Kong-Lê's positions, Washington authorized an emergency airlift to deliver canvass boots and new uniforms recently purchased from Japan, plus four hundred new rifles and a two-month supply of ammunition to provision eight mobile fighting groups. [\[20\]](#)

[50]

Much to everyone's surprise, the Soviets donated nine of their own cargo planes to the relief effort. Moscow was just as alarmed as Washington by the massive influx of NVA into

Laos. The fear was that the buildup would give the U.S. a pretext for committing its own forces to the conflict, undermining any possibility for détente. The Soviets had voiced these concerns to the North Vietnamese but they fell on deaf ears. In a "read my lips" gesture the Soviets shut down their air transport from Hanoi to Laos, compelling the North Vietnamese to move all supplies overland by truck convoy.

[51]

With so much aid going to the Neutralist army, Washington wanted assurances from Kong-Lê that he would not bite the hand feeding him. Jack Mathews was again called back from Africa to meet with Kong-Lê to ascertain his intentions. Mathews spent two weeks this time and secured the pledge his superiors wanted. As an added bonus, Mathews arranged a meeting between Kong-Lê and Vang Pao to see what might be done to get them working together. The two montagnard warriors had a grudging respect for each other. Kong-Lê assured Vang Pao he would continue the fight even if forced off the plain. Vang Pao pledged Kong-Lê sanctuary if that came to pass and demonstrated his sincerity by sending Hmong units to the southern edge of the plain as bait to draw the communists away from Neutralist forces.

[52]

Vang Pao's attempt at a rapprochement with Kong-Lê was not all bonhomie. He planned to augment Hmong troops with Khmu from Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, and Phong Saly where there were large concentrations of Khmu tribesmen. As Kong-Lê was the preeminent Khmu military and political figure in Laos, his goodwill was essential to the project.

[53]

The chicane was a success. Kong-Lê came to view the Hmong

more as potential allies than enemies. He ordered his troops to show greater respect for Hmong villagers and even executed one of his soldiers for stealing a cow from a Hmong peasant. As a special favor to Vang Pao and his CIA advisors, Kong-Lê delivered into their hands Somboun Chamtavong, a Khmu chieftain from the upper panhandle who had murdered two members of a PARU team and fled to Kong-Lê for protection. Vang Pao had Somboun shot and left to rot next to an airfield. [{21}](#)

[54]

Turning one of his own tribal leaders over for execution was strong testimony of Kong-Lê's newfound regard for Vang Pao. The message was not lost on Khmu in Sayaboury and Luang Prabang where PARU teams were beating the bush to recruit Khmu for Vang Pao's army. A month after the recruitment drive Vang Pao was able to add a second SGU battalion to his army; while the officers were all Hmong, over half of the troops were Khmu from Sayaboury and Luang Prabang. [{22}](#) In time, Khmu would come to constitute 22 percent of all of Vang Pao's battalion-size units. [{23}](#)

The RLA Wins A Battle

[55]

True to his pledge, when the communists continued to hammer away at his army, Kong-Lê fought on, holed up in his new headquarters at Muong Soui just west of the plain, kept alive by truck convoys from Vientiane delivering food, fuel, arms, and ammunition. To cut this supply line, the communists overran Sala Phu Khun at the junction of Routes 13 and 7, the link between the highway coming from Vientiane and the road leading to Muong Soui. The blocking force settled in for a long stay, determined to hold ground until

Kong-Lê's army withered on the vine.

[56]

In a rare moment, and with considerable pressure from U.S. ambassador Unger, the RLA general staff found some backbone and went after the communists with six regiments, attacking from three different directions. The toughest part was advancing over the thirty-mile stretch between Vang Vieng and Sala Phu Khun. For months the Pathet Lao had been investing the area with troops. The regiments plowed through the communists with relative ease, thanks to a simple scheme devised by an American intelligence officer. Each RLA forward unit carried a large wooden arrow, painted white. Once an advanced unit encountered resistance it laid down the arrow pointing in the direction of the enemy. Forward air controllers flying overhead called in Lao Air Force T-28 bombers to saturate the designated area with heavy ordnance.

[57]

In total numbers the six regiments outmanned the Pathet Lao's three battalions at Sala Phu Khun by six to one; the RLA regiments also carried 105-mm and 75-mm howitzers. As the RLA force converged on the town, the Pathet Lao battalions measured their options and withdrew. At the last moment Vang Pao committed one of his SGUs to the campaign, delivering the mobile battalion to Sala Phu Khun by Air America helicopters. Since Sala Phu Khun was deserted, the Hmong were able to liberate the town without firing a shot. The Hmong waited to greet the RLA regiments. The Lao columns arrived the next day. Their commanders, finding only triumphant Hmong grinning from ear to ear, were uncontrollably "livid over the Hmong end run." [\[24\]](#)

[58]

The general staff back in Vientiane were elated, however. It

was one of the RLA's few authentic victories to date. Abhay and several other top generals flew to the town to strut and celebrate. As rice whiskey flowed, the euphoria of the moment had the generals boasting that their next move would be to sweep the Pathet Lao and NVA from the Plain of Jars. They were brought back to reality when their troops reverted to form once they caught up with the fleeing Pathet Lao battalions near Muong Soui. Meeting stiff resistance they withdrew south, leaving Kong-Lê's beleaguered soldiers to fend for themselves. Within a few weeks, the Neutralists at Muong Soui were entirely encircled by NVA and a token force of Pathet Lao. [\[25\]](#)

A Taste Of American Air Power

[59]

The U.S. protested the siege at the United Nations, charging the communists with attempting to eliminate through force the government created by the 1962 Geneva agreement. The diplomatic posturing was little help to Kong-Lê. What he needed was U.S. air strikes to dislodge the communists. Ambassador Unger was of the same mind. He made an urgent request to the Johnson administration to authorize air sorties over Muong Soui.

[60]

Shortly after taking office, Lyndon Johnson had confided to Henry Cabot Lodge: "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." [\[26\]](#) Unlike Kennedy, Johnson welcomed an escalation of the war, convinced that once the North Vietnamese experienced the military might of the U.S. they would negotiate a settlement that would leave them bottled up in the north. [\[27\]](#) Giving them a taste of American air power in Laos seemed a good

idea. Unger got his authorization.

[61]

To pinpoint enemy positions, twin-engine RF-101 Voodoo jets equipped with an assortment of aerial cameras flew reconnaissance. The communists were ready, having set up anti-aircraft cannons at sixteen different sites on the plain. The rapid firing cannons, capable of 150 rounds per minute, brought down one of the jets. The two Air America helicopters sent to rescue the pilot also came under fire. Shrapnel seriously wounded some of their crew and the rescue was aborted. On the ground, Pathet Lao troops closed in on the downed Voodoo's pilot, Charles Klausmann, and took him prisoner. Another reconnaissance jet went down the next day. This time the pilot was rescued. [\[28\]](#)

[62]

In retaliation for the shootdowns, President Johnson ordered an air strike with eight F-100 Super Saber jets, the first use of American offensive air power in Laos. While the Sabers dropped their ordnance on anti-aircraft batteries on the plain, the Lao air force launched its tiny armada of World War II vintage T-28s, A-26 light bombers, and hand-me-down Navy A-1 Skyraiders. Carrying bombs recently supplied by the U.S., the propeller-driven planes hammered NVA and Pathet Lao units pressing in on Muong Soui. [\[29\]](#) The communists finally pulled back.

The Ambassador's New Role

[63]

The communist offensive on the plain, and downed American aircraft, destroyed whatever was left of America's desire to

seek a political settlement in Laos. Washington gave Bill Lair the nod to renew support and training for the Hmong, but now on a much larger scale. The rest of the CIA organization also returned to Laos to resume operations, though under a new set of rules established earlier by President Kennedy.

[64]

The Bay of Pigs fiasco had embarrassed Kennedy and revealed the CIA at its most inept.[{30}](#) Nevertheless, Kennedy still valued the CIA, partly because he had an "almost obsessive interest in intelligence" and because he was a firm believer in undercover operations, especially counterinsurgency of the Green Beret variety. But the Bay of Pigs convinced him he would have to exercise greater control over the CIA to prevent new disasters in the future.[{31}](#)

[65]

In mid-1961, shortly after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy had reduced the agency's role in paramilitary operations in Laos, giving more responsibility to the White Star teams for training and support.[{32}](#) To guard against renegade operations in the future, Kennedy placed the CIA under the authority of U.S. Ambassador, Leonard Unger. This was part of a larger shake-up in the state department. Kennedy wanted American ambassadors across the globe to take greater responsibility for all U.S. activities on foreign soil, particularly covert operations. On May 29th, 1961, every ambassador received a letter from the President outlining these new responsibilities, which included supervision and control of all U.S. agencies in-country, and even military forces if an American commander was not on the scene.[{33}](#)

[66]

Applied to Laos, the new policy was an attempt to prevent

diplomatic and covert operations from traveling separate paths, as they had in the months following Kong-Lê's coup. {34} The new policy not only gave Ambassador Unger oversight of all CIA activities, it soon placed him in charge of all U.S. military operations in the country, for after the 1962 Geneva accords there was no longer a U.S. military command in Laos. The military assistance program (MAAG/Laos) had moved to Thailand to become submerged in MAAG/Thailand as DEPCHIEF {35} in order to maintain the pretense of no direct U.S. military action in Laos. The cosmetic move gave Unger, as well as the two Ambassadors who would follow him, complete authority over all military and paramilitary operations in the country, making them the equivalent of a Roman proconsul, a combination of state administrator and military field marshal.

[67]

To manage this new responsibility, Unger established the Requirements Office (RO). Masquerading as a part of the United States Aid Mission, the RO was where decisions on military operations in Laos were made by Unger in consultation with the CIA section chief and several military attaches. General Reuben Tucker, who commanded DEPCHIEF in Thailand, was never consulted. Left out of policy making, his only role was that of a glorified warrant officer. His job was to insure that the arms, personnel, and supplies requested by Unger reached Laos. {36} To facilitate this task, Tucker supervised a 380-acre munitions storage facility near Udorn air base, plus an Air America facility at Udorn, port facilities in the Gulf of Thailand, and a large warehouse at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport.

[68]

While this placed enormous resources at Unger's fingertips, it was only after Washington gave up on neutralism that he had the green light to tap them. By then Unger's tour of

duty was nearly over. However, his replacement, William Sullivan, would keep General Tucker busy around-the-clock providing the logistics for Vang Pao's expanding guerrilla army.

Phoumi's Last Coup

[69]

1964 was a good year for the communists. They controlled the Plain of Jars, had Kong-Lê bottled up at Muong Soui, and had retaken most of the Sam Neua territory lost to Vang Pao in mid-1963. This should have been cause for concern at RLA headquarters in Vientiane, but the top generals were too busy fighting each other to worry about the enemy.

[70]

In August Phoumi attempted a coup. Kouprasith Abhay mobilized his forces and nipped it in the bud. Five months later Phoumi was at it again, this time with the complicity of Colonel Khamkhong Bouddavong, commander of MR II. Abhay requested help from General Siho to suppress the coup attempt, asking that he commit his police battalions to save the capital. Siho sat on his hands and did nothing. It was a bad move.

[71]

Abhay raised an entire regiment, secured air support, and went after all three: Phoumi, Khamkhong, and Siho. The national police headquarters outside of Vientiane was soon a burning inferno, blown apart and set ablaze by 155-mm howitzers. Fighter planes bombed and strafed Siho's best battalions billeted twelve miles north of Vientiane. Khamkhong's troops caved in and surrendered, as did

Phoumi's. It was Phoumi's last coup. Along with Siho he fled to Thailand. Khamkhong wound up in jail, leaving MR II without a commander. [\[37\]](#)

William Sullivan

[72]

In January 1965, nearly three years after Phoumi first offered him the position, Vang Pao was again asked to take command of the second military region. This time the offer came from the prime minister, though the decision was probably not Souvanna Phouma's alone. William Sullivan, the new U.S. ambassador, was committed to a clandestine war and believed a guerrilla army could defeat the NVA. Believing Vang Pao to be a military genius in matters of guerrilla warfare, he wanted him in charge of the "real" fighting.

[73]

Sullivan had been part of the American delegation at Geneva and helped draft the final document, which prohibited foreign troops from operating on Laotian soil. Since the Geneva agreement carried the imprint of his diplomatic skill, Sullivan had a personal stake in making it work, or at least appear to work. Above all else he wanted to camouflage the true extent of America's illegal involvement in the conflict. A large military mission and arms assistance program like MAAG/Laos was too conspicuous.

[74]

Sullivan approved of the earlier decision to move MAAG/Laos out of Laos and hide it inside MAAG/Thailand. He wanted the war in Laos to be invisible to the outside world. Using the Viet Cong as his model, he intended to "borrow from the

practice of the North Vietnamese and act through a clandestine, deniable system of paramilitary assistance, with any actual fighting being done by indigenous forces . . . drawn from the Hmong tribes." Not only was a guerrilla army easy to conceal, Sullivan was convinced it was the only fighting force capable of thwarting a North Vietnamese victory in Laos.

[75]

Two years earlier Sullivan had participated in a controversial war game organized by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to determine the advisability of committing American troops to Vietnam. The generals were divided. Those from the U.S. Air Force believed superior air power could neutralize communist forces and hamper their supply lines, making it impossible for them to maintain an effective army in the field. Generals from the other services were less confident. To settle the matter, the joint chiefs took part in a war game, with the rules drawn up by the Rand Corporation, a think tank under contract to the defense department.

[76]

Sullivan played on the communist team in the role of General Giap. The simulated war covered ten years, with the communists employing traditional guerrilla tactics against the American team's superior weapons and technology. The game ran for a week. At the conclusion, which in game time was the year 1972, communist forces were all over the map of Indochina, covering most of Vietnam and occupying large portions of Laos and Cambodia. American troop strength was at 500,000 with no end of the war in sight. Equally disturbing was the domestic politics component of the game. Ten years of fighting had only increased the solidarity of the North Vietnamese while American voters were deeply divided; there were antiwar protests on university campuses; congress was on the brink of revolt against the President.

[77]

A few days into the game, still playing the role of Giap, Sullivan launched a guerrilla raid against Bien Hoa Airfield in South Vietnam and, on paper at least, destroyed a large number of American aircraft. The year according to the game's clock was 1964. Sullivan happened to be at Bien Houa in November of 1964 when real communist guerrillas assaulted the airfield. Right on schedule they blew up fuel storage sites, ammunition dumps, and several planes.

[78]

The war game made Sullivan a believer. Guerrilla tactics worked. But it was all theory until the Viet Cong assault on Bien Houa. Suddenly Sullivan understood at gut level that guerrilla action was an effective way to defeat a superior force, something America's military planners had yet to appreciate. Applied to Laos, Sullivan was convinced that supporting Vang Pao offered a unique opportunity to turn the tables on the North Vietnamese. The Hmong would become America's Viet Cong, an indigenous guerrilla force that harassed and bled a militarily superior enemy, frustrating him at every turn. As ambassador, Sullivan intended to acknowledge Vang Pao's Hmong army as the centerpiece of Laos' response to the invading North Vietnamese. Kennedy's earlier state department policy changes gave him the authority to do so. And Sullivan's standing in Washington gave him the clout to use that authority as he saw fit.

[79]

Sullivan had earlier served as chairman of President Johnson's "Vietnam Working Group," a special committee charged with developing strategy for conducting the Vietnam War. It confirmed his reputation as a major player in the Johnson administration and made him a favorite of the president. After Sullivan became ambassador, every six

months or so Johnson called him back from Laos to have a look at briefing maps, give Sullivan a pat on the back, and press more money on him to carry out the war in his own way. As Sullivan remembers, "once this was in the form of a snap decision on his part to give me \$75 million that neither I nor the Department of State had asked for." [\[38\]](#) Sullivan could run the war any way he wanted.

[80]

In retrospect, Sullivan's ambassadorship was the last in a chain of events that made Vang Pao the focus of America's response to communist aggression in Laos. It began with Bill Lair's ambition for a role in Laos for PARU, followed by the CIA's decision to involve PARU teams in Phoumi's assault on Vientiane, placing Lair and his PARU in Laos where they could make contact with Vang Pao. Lair had barely begun to formulate his ideas for a PARU-trained Hmong guerrilla force when Desmond FitzGerald, chief of covert actions for Asia, arrived in Vientiane looking for a new direction for the agency in Laos. Once Lair told FitzGerald about Vang Pao, Operation Momentum was born, then given an unexpected boost by the Geneva accords which forbade an overt U.S. military presence in Laos, making covert operations all the more attractive. With Sullivan as ambassador, the last piece was in place.

Vinton Lawrence's Nation-Building Campaign

[81]

As commander of MR II, Vang Pao had plans to double his army from seven to fifteen thousand troops and to organize the bulk into SGUs: battalion-size units of five hundred soldiers divided into a headquarters unit and three line companies armed with 60-mm mortars, 57-mm recoilless

cannons, machine guns, and M-16 rifles. [\[39\]](#) The SGUs were designed to pack a punch and yet remain highly mobile so they could be inserted or extracted at a moment's notice by helicopters or light transport aircraft. Two SGUs were already in operation; four more were in embryonic form. Vang Pao envisaged a dozen SGUs forming the core of his guerrilla army.

[82]

The larger units were needed because of the changing nature of the war. Vang Pao's troops had routed the Pathet Lao in nearly every encounter, forcing them by degrees to retire from the serious fighting and allow the North Vietnamese to take their place, turning the war into a contest between Hmong guerrillas and the NVA. At this early stage Vang Pao still imagined that victory was possible, if he could only recruit enough Hmong for the fighting, organize them into air-mobile battalions, and equip his troops with modern weapons.

[83]

Recruiting more Hmong was not a simple proposition. Vang Pao may have rejoiced at America's decision to shift support from the regular RLA to his own army, but for ordinary Hmong on the sidelines it was a dubious honor. If the Lao ran away from the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, why should the Hmong do their fighting and defend a nation that treated them as inferiors? More than a few Hmong could still recall, prior to Touby's rise to power, how they had to kowtow to ethnic Lao, crawling on all fours to the desk of a petty Lao bureaucrat to gain an audience. Such memories were not conducive to blind patriotism.

[84]

CIA agents working closely with Vang Pao understood the

seriousness of the problem. Vinton Lawrence had been in on the start of Momentum and had stayed on at Long Cheng when the rest of the CIA pulled out as required by the Geneva accords. Only twenty-one, Lawrence was the youngest agent in the field, having signed on with the CIA right after graduating from Princeton. Despite his youth, or perhaps because of his education, Lawrence was prone to reflection.

[85]

During his first few months in Laos Lawrence worked for Lair in Vientiane at "Meo Alley," the compound the CIA had set aside for Lair's headquarters. It was a break-in period allowing Lawrence time to acclimatize. Lawrence knew nothing about the Hmong and his ignorance troubled him. At nights he went out drinking with the older agents, constantly probing them with questions about the Hmong, wanting to know about their history and culture and how best to deal with them. Lawrence took this same inquisitive spirit into the field, keeping his eyes open to pick up anything and everything that would give him a better understanding of the mysterious mountain people he would soon be advising on matters that could affect their very survival. [{40}](#)

[86]

After working closely with the Hmong for a year, Lawrence felt he had some grasp of their strengths and weaknesses. He concluded that changing Hmong politics was even more important than training and equipping them to fight a war. The Hmong were hopelessly parochial. The center of their universe was family and village and they felt no call to leave home to fight far away, even to defend fellow Hmong. To fight in distant places for something as abstract as a free Laos made no sense to them at all. The Hmong needed a sense of themselves as one people and a vision of Laos as their motherland.

[87]

Lawrence got the CIA to build a house at Long Cheng for the provincial governor, Sai Kham, and persuaded him to move in (which wasn't difficult since the provincial capital was in communist hands) so the Hmong could make contact with a top Lao bureaucrat and identify with him as a leader of both the Hmong and Lao. Even more important to Lawrence's thinking was building a residence for Savang Vatthana, so the king could make periodic visits for the laying-on of hands to consecrate the Hmong war as a national crusade.

[88]

The king did show up in late 1963 to red carpets and Hmong children waving Laotian flags; Savang Vatthana affirmed the Hmong were bona fide Laotian citizens and that he was their king and that Laos appreciated the sacrifice they were making for the nation. Lawrence believed the visit had provided Vang Pao "a cachet, that he had been recognized; that his people had been recognized and appreciated." Even Bill Lair, who helped organize the visit, was satisfied that the "Hmong were on their way to being successfully assimilated into the larger Laotian scene."[{41}](#)

[89]

Lair's enthusiasm persuaded Lawrence to move ahead with his "nation-building" program and establish a radio station at Long Cheng, which he named the Union of Lao Races radio station. Broadcasting daily in Hmong, Lao, and Khmu, the station promoted the idea that the mountain minorities were all Lao citizens who had to unite together to defend Laos against communist aggression. Lawrence considered the radio station the crowning achievement of his nation-building campaign.[{42}](#)

[90]

To help Lawrence's nation-building, USAID took Hmong village leaders to Vientiane and Luang Prabang, guided tours to expose them to the mainstream of Lao society so that it would no longer seem alien. USAID also constructed a road from Route 13 to Long Cheng to integrate Hmong into the national economy and increase the contact between Hmong and Lao. As one USAID official put it: "There was this constant effort to try to tell them that they were part of one country." However, the same official also conceded that "whether they believed it or not or understood it, I make no pretense of even guessing." {43}

[91]

Testimony from Hmong interviews suggests that the effort had little effect on the vast majority of ordinary Hmong. {44} They were far from being assimilated, nor did they ever develop anything approaching a firm allegiance to the Lao state. The king's visit had done more to legitimize Vang Pao to the Lao elite (though only barely) than to legitimize the Lao state to the Hmong.

[92]

Vang Pao knew the Hmong felt little allegiance to Vientiane, that Vinton Lawrence had tried to change Hmong politics and failed. If Hmong politics could not be changed, then it would have to be manipulated to support the war effort. This would not be easy. In the absence of messianic leadership (and Vang Pao did not qualify), cooperation among Hmong on a large scale for any purpose or ideal did not come easily. Divided by narrow allegiances to tribe and clan, Hmong were more prone to dissension than concord.

[93]

There were three Hmong tribes in Laos (Green, White, and

Striped), each with a unique tribal dress and separate dialect. In the larger villages, families tended to cluster by tribe, spoke to each other in their own dialect, honored tribal dress, and shared religious rituals that set them apart from their neighbors.[{45}](#) Though this divided Hmong from each other, it was a far cry from the daggers-drawn diffidence that existed between Hmong tribes in China.[{46}](#) Still, there was sufficient tribal bigotry in Laos to poison the wellspring of goodwill, making cooperation, even for mutual benefit, tenuous.

[94]

Living in primitive conditions in Sam Neua and Phong Saly in isolated villages on remote mountains, the Striped Hmong were stereotyped by Green and White Hmong as country bumpkins and made the butt of jokes: hardly the sort of thing to inspire ethnic solidarity. Between 1964 and 1966 when NVA units occupied Laos' far north, thousands of Striped Hmong sought sanctuary in Xieng Khouang Province, the hub of the Hmong war effort and White Hmong territory. Despite receiving sanctuary, the refugees refused to contribute soldiers to fight the Vietnamese or gather intelligence on enemy troop movements. Resentment for White Hmong bigotry crowded out the larger issue of race solidarity and the goal of reclaiming their homeland.

[95]

Clan loyalty also caused problems. There were eighteen Hmong clans in Laos.[{47}](#) Each clan had its own customs associated with birth, marriage, and death that set it apart from the others. More important, obligations for mutual aid were clan-based. A Hmong turned first to his or her immediate family, then to close clan relations, and finally to distant clan cousins for support when in need, for each clan was expected to take care of its own. It was a convention that encouraged Hmong to live in close proximity to fellow

clansmen and to trust individuals from their own clan over those from different clans. The effect was to narrow allegiances.[{48}](#)

[96]

For this reason, except for Pa Chay's messianic movement, Hmong politics in Laos had always been clan-based. To be successful a Hmong politician had to first build a power base within his own clan, then forge alliances with leaders of other clans to establish broad governance which, at least on the surface, purported to represent the Hmong qua Hmong rather than merely the interests of, say, the Ly or Lo clan. Only Touby had pulled this off, and only because he controlled the Hmong opium market that delivered spoils to reward supporters and buy off challengers. If Vang Pao meant to match Touby's achievement, he would have to develop his own source of spoils and on a much larger scale than even Touby had imagined possible.

Machine Politics Hmong-Style

[97]

MR II encompassed Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua, two provinces populated mainly by montagnards, primarily Hmong, Khmu, and highland T'ai. One condition Vang Pao attached to accepting command of the military region was that he be granted complete authority over the ethnic minorities.[{49}](#) Souvanna Phouma did not object. It transformed Vang Pao into a virtual warlord.

[98]

Vang Pao used his new authority to create an independent political administration for Xieng Khouang[{50}](#) that would

eventually include several hundred nai bans, seventy tassengs, dozens of nai kongs, and five chao muongs, plus hundreds of minor bureaucrats serving as staff for tassengs, nai kongs, and chao muongs.[\[51\]](#) There were also positions on advisory councils attached to chao muongs, groups of clan elders who drew a salary like all the rest. There was a civic administration that included school administrators, public health officials, various advisory boards, and an extensive police force.

[99]

Vang Pao did not have the authority to abolish the old Lao provincial bureaucracy. These officials continued to draw salaries from Vientiane, though they no longer exercised real power. In time they would cease maintaining offices and entirely withdraw from the affairs of the province, so completely receding into the background that most Hmong presumed the old bureaucracy had been dismantled and replaced by Vang Pao's vast system of spoils.

[100]

To forge alliances with clan chieftains, Vang Pao appointed representatives of the most powerful clans to the top posts in his administration (chao muong, nai kong, tasseng, and nai ban). As the Ly clan was the most powerful, Ly notables received many of the highest offices, which was only good politics. Vang clansmen were also rewarded, and out of proportion to their place in the clan hierarchy. This was bad politics, though by past standards the level of favoritism was not extreme. Only toward the end of the war, when things were going badly in the field and leaders of various clans maneuvered to bring him down, did Vang Pao overload his bureaucracy with Vang.

[101]

The higher posts in Vang Pao's administration came with substantial salaries. Eventually, they would grow to become ten times higher than those received by "official" provincial authorities. By the late 1960s chao muongs drew a salary of a hundred thousand kip per month (about four hundred dollars), distributed by Vang Pao at the close of his monthly meeting with all top political appointees. And there were fringe benefits. In 1969 Vang Pao honored five chao muongs drawn from the Ly, Moua, Thao, and Yang clans with brand new jeeps, each vehicle painted white to set it apart from the models used by ordinary soldiers.

[102]

Over the years Vang Pao created additional posts, well-paid sinecures with no real duties, to buy off potential rivals and disgruntled political allies. He also used his influence with the CIA and American embassy to wangle positions for Hmong in the national ministries, from low-level bureaucratic posts to top positions in the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Justice.

[103]

To reach beyond clan leaders to the rank and file, Vang Pao distributed an array of benefits to ordinary Hmong who supported his cause. With the CIA's deep pockets he was able to pay volunteers for full-time military service much higher salaries than that received by regular soldiers in the RLA, eventually ten times more. The highest pay went to Hmong pilots, ordinary Hmong who joined Vang Pao's tiny air force, begun in 1968. Going from rags to riches, some of these pilots earned more than Xieng Khouang's top civil servants, which apart from their derring-do in the skies transformed them into cultural heroes for Hmong peasants secretly resentful of the unearned privileges of clan aristocrats.

[104]

For thousands of poor Hmong peasants earning less than lowland rice farmers, soldiering for Vang Pao was a way to abandon a life of grinding poverty for one of relative affluence. During much of the war (before mid-1968) this inducement alone was sufficient to guarantee an adequate supply of recruits, especially as income from military chits came to be treated as appanage. Eldest sons had the right to take the place of wounded or killed fathers to keep the family on the military dole. In time this would extend to the greening buds of the family tree as young teenagers replaced their dead elder brothers, creating platoons of Lilliputian soldiers in baggy uniforms with sleeves rolled up to the elbows to free tiny hands for the operation of man-size weapons.

[105]

For Hmong in the ADCs, family dependence on military pay was not a life and death matter. Soldiers were headquartered in their home village where the family had a farm to fall back on. But the SGUs were at Long Cheng, and Vang Pao encouraged the soldiers in these battalions to relocate their families near the military base. Without a farm to work, military pay was the only thing that kept these families going, which was an additional reason Vang Pao wanted to reorganize his entire army into SGU battalions; it increased his control. As CIA agent Vinton Lawrence put it, "When the families come to Long Cheng, in effect they are hostage to Vang Pao. And Vang Pao knows that. That helps him control the troops."[\[52\]](#)

[106]

There were also communal incentives for backing the war effort. Money, rice, and weapons went to every Hmong village that contributed soldiers to the cause. This support was sometimes offered in terms villagers found difficult to

refuse: either accept the support and deliver up recruits or be considered pro Pathet Lao, with the implication that the village might be subjected to attack.[{53}](#) In 1971 Hmong villagers at Long Pot held fast to their commitment to stay out of the war and refused to support Vang Pao. Long Pot was bombed by T-28s and American jets stationed in Thailand.[{54}](#)

[107]

Large salaries for soldiers and politicians, bribes to village chieftains, and food and supplies for villages willing to support the war effort, required a great deal of money. Vang Pao had the power to tax but never used it. Taxes, largely unofficial, had become burdensome in the last years of Touby's reign. Hmong were paying household taxes, fees for marriage certificates, and sales taxes. Some Hmong officials brazenly appropriated cattle, horses, silver, and opium simply because they had the power to do so. Others solicited bribes to influence legal and administrative decisions. Preoccupied with national politics, Touby did nothing to stop his local appointees from fleecing Hmong communities across the province.

[108]

Vang Pao had watched the corruption erode Touby's once impregnable power base and vowed never to make the same mistake. As commander of MR II he would repeatedly proclaim he was a soldier and not a politician and therefore above politics and corruption. It was hyperbole. Over the years Vang Pao would cheat, lie, order assassinations, and fiddle with the public purse. But one thing he did not do was take from the common man. For years this was enough to save him from the taint of corruption, at least in the eyes of ordinary Hmong.

[109]

To verify he was a man of the people, one of Vang Pao's first administrative acts was to abolish all taxes, official and unofficial. It was a popular move, but left him without a source of public revenue. He made up for the loss from other areas. One was soldiers' pay. For much of the war Vang Pao personally delivered soldiers' pay to unit commanders in the field. With each soldier receiving 8,000 kip per month, plus an additional 200 kip per day for combat duty, [{55}](#) the total monthly allotment for all of his troops occasionally topped 250 million kip (approximately \$1 million). Acting as his own paymaster, it was easy for Vang Pao to skim money, which he did from two ends.

[110]

In Thailand Vang Pao's agents converted soldiers' pay, denominated in American dollars, into Thai dollars (baht). In Laos they converted the baht to kip. Thousands of dollars were skimmed during both money exchanges and delivered to Vang Pao, minus what his agents set aside for themselves. Vang Pao's brother-in-law, Pa Chay Thao, was his principal agent for the currency exchanges. By the early 1970s, Pa Chay Thao owned two airplanes, several houses, and extensive property in Thailand. [{56}](#)

[111]

A transport plane delivered the kip left over from the money exchanges, several tons worth, to Long Cheng where Vang Pao took possession and distributed it to troops in the field. [{57}](#) The U.S. funded his battalions at full strength, but Vang Pao often kept them staffed far below the required 550, usually by retaining dead soldiers on the pay rosters. A 1970 government audit found that five of his battalions were understaffed by nearly fifteen hundred men. Pay for these dead soldiers netted Vang Pao nearly fifty thousand dollars per month.

[112]

And there was money from various businesses. After 1965 the secret war created tens of thousands of refugees yearly who swarmed into the villages and settlements around Long Cheng for security and to receive aid. The refugees created an expanding consumer market for goods of all kinds. In time there would be more than a hundred thousand Hmong in the area, making Long Cheng the second largest city in Laos. There were also Khmu and Lao refugees, forty thousand of them mixed in with the Hmong. The population growth transformed the once sleepy villages of Ban Some, Sam Thong, Phak Khet, Pha Khao, Muong Cha, and Ban Houakham into bustling centers of commerce fueled by soldiers' pay and a healthy black market in goods distributed to Hmong by USAID.

[113]

Vang Pao's airline, Xieng Khouang Air Transport, delivered hundreds of tons of merchandise to villages throughout the region every month. Vang Pao was a major retailer of these goods, employing a staff of Hmong salesmen to peddle items door-to-door in the larger villages.[{58}](#) He was also into banking, handling deposits and money exchanges at the Long Cheng Bank, the only Hmong-owned financial institution in Laos.

[114]

And then there were narcotics. Vang Pao had mixed feelings about opium. He preached against the evils of addiction, but was pragmatic with addicts; occasionally he airdropped opium to troops in the field so addicted soldiers involved in a prolonged campaign would not suffer withdrawal and impede the effectiveness of their unit.[{59}](#) Nor did he have any reservations about trafficking in the drug if it advanced his ends.

[115]

Vang Pao first became involved in the opium trade in 1963. Desperate for more soldiers but strapped for the cash to add them to his pay roster, he used military helicopters to collect opium from mountain villages and delivered the narcotics to merchants in central Vietnam where opium fetched top dollar. Most of the money from the sales went for soldiers' salaries, though Tony Poe later claimed Vang Pao grew rich from narcotics trafficking. [{60}](#)

[116]

Vang Pao greatly expanded his involvement in narcotics once the war heated up after 1965. The intense fighting kept opium merchants out of the highlands. In village after village, opium harvests moldered in sheds instead of reaching the market. Rather than let the fruit of their labor rot in burlap sacks, Hmong farmers in communist-held territory north of the Plain of Jars began selling their harvest to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. [{61}](#) Profits from these deals purchased weapons to kill Hmong soldiers. To deny the opium to the communists and to reap the profits for himself, Vang Pao arranged for the CIA to begin transporting opium from the highlands to Vientiane, Saigon, and Bangkok.

[117]

To undermine Vang Pao's narcotics operation, Moscow sent Hanoi fifteen tons of silver, plus 3.5 million feet of black, green, and red cloth much prized by the Hmong, to trade for Hmong opium before Vang Pao could get his hands on it. The plan might have worked had the North Vietnamese not botched the operation. To be negotiable the silver had to be recast into ingots the size of candy bars used by the Hmong in business transactions. The task seemed beyond Hanoi's ability and very little of the silver entered the Hmong

highlands. [{62}](#)

[118]

With no serious economic competition from the communists, Vang Pao was able to expand his opium collection network to accommodate nearly all of the Hmong opium grown in Laos, much of it transported by his own private airline, Xieng Khouang Air Transport, launched in 1967 and subsidized with CIA funds. [{63}](#) Thousands of Hmong villages in opium growing areas became dependent on him for their cash income, an economic fact of life that made them reluctant to deny his requests for military volunteers to flesh out his growing army.

[119]

The money from narcotics, skimmed soldiers' pay, and various business enterprises went mostly to subsidize the political patronage that guaranteed the fidelity of clan leaders. To purchase the loyalty of ordinary Hmong, Vang Pao used refugee relief. At its height, refugee aid funded by the U.S. created jobs, provided services, and distributed food and clothing to more than half of the Hmong in Laos. The principal force behind refugee aid was USAID. With CIA funds the organization established schools, delivered food, clothing, medicine, and created agricultural projects for Hmong displaced by the war.

[120]

Nearly every village of any size supporting the war effort had a school of some kind. In the early 1960s, on his own initiative Edgar Buell had initiated a village school movement with supplies donated by the United States Information Agency and the CIA. Buell would later boast that eighty thousand Hmong children attended his village schools. [{64}](#) This was an exaggeration. The real growth in school

attendance occurred later when USAID began to deliver lumber, cement, and tin sheeting to Hmong communities so villagers could erect their own schoolhouses. USAID donated blackboards and chalk, books and school supplies, and trained Hmong to be teachers.

[121]

The textbooks for the elementary schools were adapted from those used by the Pathet Lao in their own education programs<books modeled after those used by Hanoi to assimilate ethnic minorities in North Vietnam into the dominant Vietnamese culture and to make them good communists. {65} The Pathet Lao's school books interspersed lessons on useful skills, mainly farming, with short tracts on national history with a Marxist slant, which USAID modified to build rather than tear down allegiance to the Royal Laotian Government.

[122]

By the end of 1969, 50 percent of all Hmong school-age children in the sixty-mile refugee corridor south of the Plain of Jars were enrolled in school. An additional three hundred Hmong were at the French high school in Vientiane and thirty-seven were studying abroad. Across Xieng Khouang Province there were three hundred elementary schools, nine junior high schools, and two high schools. {66} The largest elementary school was at Sam Thong, with seven thousand students. There was also a high school at Sam Thong, teaching grades seven through ten, and a teacher's college. The college was Vang Pao's idea. Too many Hmong were going to Vientiane for teacher training, slipping from his influence and control.

[123]

Another service provided by USAID was medical care. Charles

Weldon, a physician with USAID, directed a program to establish medical dispensaries in Hmong villages and train Hmong as medics and nurses. Weldon eventually expanded the crude hospital created by Edgar Buell at Sam Thong into a hundred-bed modern facility, staffed by American physicians on contract with USAID. Within a few years there was another modern hospital at Long Cheng staffed by Thai physicians.`

[124]

All refugees received food, cooking oil, clothing, pots and pans, and medicine (much of donated by U.S. drug firms because it had past its expiration date and could no longer be marketed in the U.S.), {67} but only villages solidly behind the war effort became sites for warehouses where these items were stored prior to distribution. Hmong living in these villages had jobs loading and unloading supplies and driving the trucks that delivered goods to refugees. And they could pilfer. This was expected and tolerated, if undertaken in moderation. The pilfering sustained a healthy black market with a reach that extended into the lowlands where food and clothing were not free.

[125]

Favored villages got tractors to help with the clearing of land, a welcome gift for swidden farmers like the Hmong who established their plots by clearing virgin forest<back-breaking work felling trees by hand, clearing away bushes with machetes, then gathering it all up into piles for burning so the ashes could be spread to fertilize the soil. It took a month of hard labor to clear and burn just a couple of acres. With a tractor it was finished in a few days. The tractors made Vang Pao a very popular man. {68}

[126]

Many of these same villages became sites for USAID

agricultural stations. The stations sponsored fish farms, pig farms, poultry farms, and cattle ranches. USAID supplied all the livestock, including the fish (fast-growing Tilapia from Thailand) for the fish farms. The agency delivered truckloads of pigs, cattle, and chickens. USAID volunteers helped Hmong form pig cooperatives and taught them how to run a modern poultry farm, complete with incubators. USAID brought in bulldozers to gouge out swales for fish ponds and delivered building material for chicken coups and pig sheds. Of all these enterprises cattle ranching was the most prestigious. Vang Pao personally purchased thousands of head of cattle from Thailand for distribution to his political and military cronies to set them up as cattle barons.

[127]

Vang Pao's administration was not all graft and patronage. He also tried to tame the clans by schooling them in cooperation, organizing various political councils with members drawn from the different clans. The most prestigious of these bodies was the Hmong Council of Elders, filled with the most respected clan chieftains in the province. All councils were purely advisory, organized to accustom the clans to working together, though Vang Pao also used them to check the pulse of Hmong public opinion and to lend a sense of unanimous support to his own political decisions.

[128]

One can only wonder what Vinton Lawrence made of all of this. He left Laos in early 1966, promoted stateside by William Colby. The CIA's Far East Chief wanted the bright young agent back at CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia as his own special assistant. [{69}](#) Sitting in an office at CIA headquarters reflecting on his two tours in Laos, did Lawrence still imagine that Vang Pao was nation-building, rather than simply spawning a political machine to guarantee recruits and generate support for his army?

[129]

Certainly Pa Chay would have found all the money laundering, skimmed payrolls, business deals, patronage, bribes, graft, and manipulation of public opinion incomprehensible, but it was the kind of politics that old-fashioned political bosses in America (men like William Tweed of New York's Tammany Hall, Thomas Pendergast of the old Kansas City political machine, and more recently Chicago's Richard J. Daley) would have understood and admired—especially as Vang Pao could do things they could only do in their dreams, like accumulate wives for political ends and assassinate rivals.

[130]

Vang Pao's first marriage was to a strikingly beautiful woman from the Lo clan. She died young, leaving behind three children. Vang Pao married again for love, this time to a woman from the Thao clan. She gave him more children but favored them over those from his first marriage. Concerned for the children's welfare, Vang Pao married his first wife's sister, May Lo, knowing she would give them the love they deserved. The rest of his marriages were political, an effort to forge family links to powerful clan leaders or as goodwill gestures to the disaffected.

[131]

He married True Ly to create blood ties directly to Touby LyFoung, [{70}](#) then wed Chia Moua to gain the allegiance of her father Cher Pao Moua, the warlord of Bouam Long, a strategic stronghold north of the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao took his next wife from Sam Neua to form better relations with the Striped Hmong, [{71}](#) and his seventh from Tase, a Moua enclave that had previously shunned his leadership. [{72}](#) His eighth wife was a Lao woman, a concession to the ethnic Lao who nearly equaled the number of Hmong in the province. [{73}](#) His ninth and last wife was Zong Moua, the daughter of

Cher Chou Moua, the chieftain of Long Cheng before Vang Pao made it his headquarters. With refugees spilling into Long Cheng and occupying land reserved for Moua clansmen, relations with Moua villagers became strained. The marriage was to cool tempers, as was Vang Pao's decision to elevate Cher Chou Moua to the head of the prestigious Hmong Council that administered Long Cheng's civil affairs and arbitrated inter-clan disputes. [\[74\]](#)

[132]

Not only did Vang Pao marry for power, if necessary he assassinated rivals and troublemakers to preserve it. Vang Pao first tried his hand at assassination in 1959 when he ordered an attack on the RLA provincial commander Colonel Khambou Boussarath. Vang Pao was also probably behind the 1963 murder of Major Sao Ly, the Hmong officer being groomed by Bill Lair as Vang Pao's understudy. How many others he ordered killed is impossible to document, though one Hmong in his inner circle believed there may have been dozens; hardly a reign of terror but substantial nevertheless. Not all of the assassinations went off without a hitch. One had serious repercussions that eroded Vang Pao's power base.

[133]

For troops garrisoned in the field, military organization mirrored Vang Pao's political administration. Whenever feasible, Vang Pao gave local clan chieftains command. This disposed nearby villages to gather intelligence and feed soldiers. This also co-opted the chieftains into Vang Pao's network of graft and payoff, for commanders were expected to hold back part of their troops' pay for themselves.

[134]

The system had its defects. Clan notables were not always competent military leaders and occasionally reached too far

into their troops' pockets, damaging morale. Besides affecting battle performance it sometimes resulted in commanders being shot by their own troops. Moderating the level of corruption was an obvious solution, but Vang Pao rejected it. The graft was needed to channel clan loyalties to his regime. Instead, he used spies drawn from the military arm of his secret police, headed by Toupao Ly (the brother of Vang Pao's fourth wife, True Ly), to identify disgruntled soldiers with murder in their hearts so they could be transferred to other units. [{75}](#)

[135]

Toupao Ly's agents were not unerring, however, and being murdered by one's own troops remained a hazard of command. One that occurred at Na Khang required Vang Pao's personal attention. A former French military base, Na Khang had been refurbished and expanded to become Vang Pao's most important northern garrison. As the region was a Vang clan enclave, many of the troops at the garrison and at its forward bases were Vang. A Vang commanded the main garrison, as well as all the forward bases, except one. Vang Pao had given command of this particular forward base to his brother-in-law, Chao Ly.

[136]

Chao Ly was not popular. He robbed soldiers of their pay, often beat them, and executed troops for failed missions; also, he was haughty toward civilians, most of whom were Vang clansmen. A delegation of Vang appealed directly to Vang Pao to have Chao Ly removed from command. Vang Pao refused. A few days later Chao Ly was dead, murdered by his own troops.

[137]

The ringleader, a junior officer named Tou Vang, [{76}](#) fled

south to Muong Mok on the edge of Khammouane Province, the fiefdom of Chong Khoua Vue, a Vue chieftain who respected no authority but his own. Chong Khoua had turned a cold shoulder to Touby during his heyday and had attacked Vang Pao's troops when they began operations in Muong Mok without his permission. Vang Pao stayed clear of the area.

[138]

Installing a Ly to rule over Vang clansmen was the sort of thing that set Chong Khoua's teeth on edge. Having earlier turned against Touby for meddling with clan autonomy, he jumped at the chance to provide Tou Vang asylum, if for no other reason than to thumb his nose at Vang Pao. It did not faze him that the murder victim was Vang Pao's brother-in-law, as well as the brother of Toupao Ly, the ruthless head of Vang Pao's secret police whose favorite pastime was administering public beatings on the Sam Thong runway to troublemakers and malcontents.

[139]

The Ly clan insisted that Vang Pao go after Tou Vang. Vang Pao's own clansmen saw Chao Ly's death as justified homicide and wanted nothing done. It was a no-win situation. If Vang Pao sent troops against Chong Khoua, he would alienate both the Vue and members of his own clan. If he did nothing, he would stir up trouble with the Ly. Things would be simpler if Tou Vang wasn't at Muong Mok.

[140]

Vang Pao turned to Sao Hang, a top agent in his secret police who hunted down army deserters and delivered them to Long Cheng for punishment. In addition to being ruthless, Sao had the right family connection: he was Tou Vang's brother-in-law. Sao went to Muong Mok and convinced Tou Vang that if he returned to Na Khang, Vang Pao would take his

side in negotiations with the Ly. Full of confidence that all would be made right, Tou Vang climbed aboard the STOL aircraft and headed for Na Khang. During the flight, T-28 fighter planes and helicopters intercepted the STOL and forced it to divert to Long Cheng. Representatives of the Ly clan were assembled and waiting on the runway. They dragged Tou Vang out of the plane and beat him savagely, knocking out his teeth and kicking in his ribs. As he lay near death on the runway, they finished him off with knives.

[141]

The Ly were avenged and Sao Hang received a promotion, plus blood money. The whole affair left Chong Khoua Vue in a rage. He vowed to shoot Vang Pao's troops on sight if they ever set foot in Muong Mok. The taunt raised Vang Pao's hackles. Chong Khoua had to go. Vang Pao chose a Vue clansmen for the job, with an offer of advancement to colonel and the position as administrative head of Muong Mok, if he pulled it off.

[142]

It took Cher Tong Vue six months to coax Chong Khoua out of Muong Mok to meet with Vang Pao at Long Cheng. Chong Khoua arrived with his son Ger Vue and two bodyguards. Cher Tong was there to greet him, along with a colonel and a squad of soldiers who escorted Chong Khoua to the Long Cheng home of a Moua clansman trusted by both sides. Vang Pao was not at the house when they arrived. It was common knowledge that the general removed himself from the scene when there was to be foul play. Chong Khoua told his son to remain outside. If there was gunfire, he was to kill anyone who came out.

[143]

Inside the house the soldiers spread out, backs against the walls. Flanked by his two bodyguards, Chong Khoua faced Cher

Tong. He asked after Vang Pao. Cher Tong ignored the question and demanded that Chong Khoua step down as chieftain of Muong Mok or suffer the consequences. Chong Khoua glared at him, his whole body shouting "over my dead body." A moment later Chong Khoua was lying dead on the floor. Cher Tong had shot him with a pistol, point-blank in the face. Then Cher Tong was also down, wounded by one of Chong Khoua's body guards. There were more gunshots. Cher Tong struggled up, blood spurting from his bullet wound, and leaped through a window. He landed outside at Ger Vue's feet. A stray bullet had wounded Ger in the arm, but he could still manage his rifle. He killed Cher Tong before he could rise.

[144]

The gunfire in the house suddenly ceased. One of Chong Khoua's bodyguards was dead, but the other one had survived to finish off everyone else, including the colonel. He yelled to Ger that he was coming out and to hold his fire. The Long Cheng police arrived. Ger ignored their shouts to drop his rifle. Cher Tong lay at his feet, obviously dead. Ger coldly pressed the muzzle of his rifle against Cher Tong's head and pulled the trigger.

[145]

Vang Pao indemnified Ger for his father's death. Though Ger accepted the money, he did not forgive. For the rest of the war the Vue of Muong Mok denied support of any kind to Vang Pao's troops. On the rare occasion when one of Vang Pao's helicopters or STOL aircraft landed on the village's airfield, the aircraft was searched and the soldiers disarmed. The incident also affected Vang Pao's relations with Vue clansmen throughout Laos. Many no longer trusted him. [\[77\]](#)

Danger Signals

[146]

Five years would pass before Vang Pao's sprawling political machine began to unravel. Early on there were danger signals that it could not last. Not everything could be manipulated, nor all discontent contained.

[147]

Shortly after assuming command of MR II, Vang Pao tried to tame Thao clansmen living south of Long Cheng. They were not run-of-the-mill Thao. For generations they had roamed the dense stretch of forest between Ban Some and the Phu Bia mountains, hunting rather than farming, living off the land and constantly on the move. Thousands of these Hmong hillbillies had left the forest to settle on the outskirts of Phak Khet, Muong Yong, and Ban Houakham, once sleepy villages but now overflowing with refugees receiving handouts from USAID. Money from military payrolls and a hefty black market had energized the local economy. Hmong were working as salesmen, clerks, taxi drivers, day laborers, dentists, and barbers.

[148]

The hustle and bustle had attracted Thao huntsmen, drawn not only by the economic opportunity but by the concentrated population that was mostly non-Thao. Exogamous like all Hmong, the forest Thao had difficulty getting brides. Living in the wilderness and forever on the go, they were always weeks away from settlements with maidens from other clans. The population explosion on the western edge of their forest haunts drew them like a magnet.

[149]

For more than a decade the forest Thao had been allied with Faydang. Deep in their forests there were Pathet Lao supply posts, bivouacked troops, and an extensive communications network. Thao huntsmen wore the Pathet Lao uniform, so many that they constituted the majority of Hmong fighting under the crimson standard. The top Hmong officer in the Pathet Lao was one of their kinsmen, Saychou Tou Thao. [\[78\]](#)

[150]

Alarmed by the migration of so many forest Thao into Vang Pao's orbit, Faydang tried to lure them back with the promise of rapid promotion in the Pathet Lao if they returned to their native wilds. Vang Pao wanted them to stay put and called on his old ally Sao Chia, the Thao chieftain who had earlier rallied Hmong on the southern edge of the plain, to prevent a stampede.

[151]

Sao Chia visited Phak Khet, Muong Yong, and Ban Houakham where he linked up with Thao leaders and made tentative offers of positions in Vang Pao's growing provincial administration to gain their loyalty. He also kept an eye out for potential troublemakers. One Thao in particular caught his eye—Shoua Ger, an ambitious young leader with a following at Ban Houakham. Sao Chia arranged a meeting to feel him out. The man was an opportunist and demanded a high post in the district administration for his loyalty. Sao Chia was willing to cut a deal but considered Shoua Ger's demand excessive; he was also annoyed by the young man's imperious attitude. To put him in his place Sao Chia said he'd get nothing. It was meant only as the opening round in negotiations, but Shoua Ger took it as a final offer.

[152]

Several days later Sao Chia was ambushed. The assassins missed their target but succeeded in killing ten of Sao Chia's bodyguards. Before Vang Pao could retaliate, Shoua Ger fled with his supporters (nearly two hundred families) into the forest south of Phu Bia to link up with Faydang and the Pathet Lao. The communists gave him an outlet for his ambition. Shoua Ger assumed command of an all-Hmong unit that went on to achieve distinction in combat against RLA forces. {79} Over the next ten years Shoua Ger would advance through the ranks to become one of the highest ranking Hmong officers in the Pathet Lao.

[153]

Not all disaffected Hmong bolted to the communists (who had their own share of Hmong defectors). {80} In early 1965, several thousand went over to the Neutralists. The leaders of this mass defection were three of Vang Pao's officers (all clan chieftains) unhappy with the slow pace of their advancement through the ranks. All were from Nong Het and had been with Vang Pao from the start. Having recruited large numbers of Hmong for his armée clandestine they expected to be rewarded with top command positions, but were constantly frustrated by Vang Pao's policy of giving field commands to clan leaders from the theater of operation.

[154]

The three officers formed their own units and tried to make a deal with the CIA and RLA to get separate funding for independent operations against the communists. When they were turned away, they approached Kong-Lê. Happy to siphon manpower from Vang Pao's guerrilla army, Kong-Lê offered to integrate them into his own forces, with the promotions they felt they deserved. More than five thousand Hmong arrived at Muong Soui, led by the Ly chieftain Chong Vang Ly and two leaders of the Vue clan, Leng Vue and Xay Toua Vue.

[155]

Kong-Lê never fully trusted his new Hmong recruits and reneged on integrating them into his army. Instead, he organized them as a separate force and billeted them at Phu Se, a mountain village near Vang Vieng where they sat out the war, spending their days erecting permanent quarters to accommodate their families who joined them at the camp. In early 1966 the camp was attacked, leaving hundreds killed or wounded. The strike was hit-and-run so the identity of the attackers was never determined. Some believed the attack was ordered by Kong-Lê; others were convinced it was the work of Vang Pao.

[156]

The camp closed in December 1966 when the Neutralist army was absorbed into the RLA, leaving the Phu Se Hmong out in the cold. No longer on the payroll, they were suddenly receptive to Vang Pao's request that they return to the fold. Chong Vang Ly and Leng Vue, two of the three chieftains who had masterminded the 1965 defection, turned down the reunion offer and stayed clear of Long Cheng. The third chieftain, Xay Toua Vue, returned to Hao Khame, a small village close to Long Cheng. He was murdered shortly after he moved in. [\[81\]](#)

[157]

Other clan leaders would also challenge Vang Pao's authority. In 1966 when Vang Pao was away healing from a bullet wound, Ly notables conspired to take over Long Cheng. Others less bold simply distanced themselves from Vang Pao's regime, delivering fewer recruits and dragging their feet in the collection of intelligence. In reaction, Vang Pao began to question the loyalty of many of his top officers and civilian officials.

[158]

Moua clansmen were a special concern. Because of their better education, Vang Pao used them as interpreters for CIA agents and American special forces. Now it crossed his mind they might be managing the flow of information to deliberately limit his ability to make sound judgments. The Ly, always too ambitious, were also suspect. And Vang Pao had always been wary of the Lo whose clan leader, Faydang, was a diehard communist. The Vue weren't to be trusted either. Not only had thousands gone over to the Neutralists in 1965, Vang Pao had Muong Mok to worry about. Except for his own clansmen the only other Hmong Vang Pao completely trusted were Thao clansmen faithful to Sao Chia Thao, the Thao clan chieftain who was a close personal friend and had remained loyal to the last.

[159]

Between 1969 and 1972, Vang Pao replaced many Moua, Ly, and Vue with Vang. He sent Vang children to America and France to be educated so they could take the place of Moua interpreters, assume top positions in his army and civil administration, and manage his personal business enterprises. [\[82\]](#) Three of his own sons were in America receiving a modern education. One of the boys, Chong, was at a military academy being groomed for a top military position.

Notes

1. John W. Huston, et. al., "Air Operations Over Northern Laos." in Carl Berger (ed), *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1977), p. 121. [\(return to text\)](#)

2. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, CO.: Paladin Press, 1995), p. 93 (note). [\(return to text\)](#)

3. Roger Warner, *Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 86, 198. [\(return to text\)](#)

4. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, p. 95. [\(return to text\)](#)

5. Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), p. 238. [\(return to text\)](#)

6. Ibid. p. 258. [\(return to text\)](#)

7. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos, Leonard Unger, showed Souvanna Phouma aerial photographs of North Vietnamese truck convoys moving daily into Laos. See Leonard Unger, "The United States and Laos, 1962-5," in Joseph Zasloff and Leonard Unger (eds.) *Laos: Beyond the Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 278. [\(return to text\)](#)

8. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, p. 109. [\(return to text\)](#)

9. Ibid., p. 125. [\(return to text\)](#)

10. Warner, *Back Fire*, p. 111. [\(return to text\)](#)
11. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, pp. 100, 104 (note). [\(return to text\)](#)
12. Ibid., p. 101. [\(return to text\)](#)
13. MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), .p. 186. [\(return to text\)](#)
14. Perry Stieglitz, *In a Little Kingdom* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 1990), p. 79. [\(return to text\)](#)
15. Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 261. Back in 1960 Abhay had prepared the way for Phoumi's coup with diversionary attacks against Kong-Lê's forces inside Vientiane, enabling Phoumi's forward units to parachute onto the edge of the capital undetected and unopposed. Abhay's reward had been a promotion to general and command of the fifth military region, making him a major player not only in the military but in capital politics. [\(return to text\)](#)
16. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, p. 106. [\(return to text\)](#)
17. Ibid., pp. 105-106. [\(return to text\)](#)

18. Unger, "The United States and Laos, 1962-65," p. 180.

[\(return to text\)](#)

19. Interview Tou Vue (1984); Don Schanche, *Mr. Pop* (New York: David McKay Co, 1970), pp. 196-198, 229; Robert Shaplen, *Time Out of Hand: Revolution and Reaction in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 349; Jane Hamilton-Merritt (*Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 121) gives the date of the massacre as August 1962, nearly two years too early. Father Lucien Buchard, a Catholic priest working near Phou Nong later claimed the number of Hmong killed was much smaller than the 1,200 to 1,300 figure reported. According to Buchard, at most only a couple of hundred were killed. Cited in Conboy and Morrison (*Shadow War*, p. 137, note). Buchard based his estimates on a census of refugees at Phou Nong, but the assault occurred further south, and included refugees from other towns. [\(return to text\)](#)

20. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, pp. 107-108; Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Christiansburg, VA: Indochina Monographs, 1984), p. 121. [\(return to text\)](#)

21. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, p. 92, (note). [\(return to text\)](#)

22. Ibid., pp. 108, 126. [\(return to text\)](#)

23. The figure is based on Vang Pao's own records in Jean Larteguy, *La Fabuleuse Aventure du Peuple du l'Opium* (Paris:

Presses de la Cite, 1979), p. 226. [\(return to text\)](#)

24. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, p. 112. [\(return to text\)](#)

25. Ibid., pp. 110-112. [\(return to text\)](#)

26. Thomas Boettcher, *Vietnam: The Valor and the Sorrow* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), p. 198. [\(return to text\)](#)

27. After leaving office, Johnson claimed that early on he realized that a continuation of the war would be a political disaster. "I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved<the Great Society>in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward." Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), p. 320. [\(return to text\)](#)

28. Earl Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1980), p. 49. [\(return to text\)](#)

29. Huston, "Air Operations Over Northern Laos," p. 122. [\(return to text\)](#)

30. The Bay of Pigs invasion was the brainchild of Jake Engler, the agency's station chief in Venezuela. Engler

gathered together operatives who had earlier organized the overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954. The Guatemalan operation had required only 150 exiles and a handful of World War Two P-47 fighter planes. Engler imagined toppling Castro's regime would be just as easy. Intelligence gathering for the Cuba operation was slipshod. No one was informed there were coral reefs in the Bay of Pigs, which made a successful amphibious landing impossible. Secrecy fell apart. Castro knew there would be an invasion and suspected the Bay of Pigs as the landing site. See Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 20-34. [\(return to text\)](#)

31. Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973), pp. 193-194. [\(return to text\)](#)

32. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, p. 88. The CIA objected to the assault on the agency's autonomy in Laos. In an August 1961 memorandum to the Defense Department, Richard Bissell, the CIA's Deputy Chief for covert actions, noted that few U.S. military personnel were involved in the program and that the CIA was doing nearly all of the training and supply of the Hmong. Bissell argued that as long as the program remained covert, the CIA's paramilitary experts should continue to run things in the field (Richard Bissell Jr, "Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence." August 10, 1961). [\(return to text\)](#)

33. The letter reads: "You are in charge of the entire U.S. Diplomatic Mission, and I expect you to supervise all of its operations. The Mission includes not only the personnel of the Department of State and the Foreign Service, but also representatives of all other United States agencies. . . . As you know, the United States Diplomatic Mission . . . does not . . . include United States military forces operating in

the field where such forces are under the command of a United States area military commander." The letter in full can be found in Timothy Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: United States Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1991), pp. 141-142). [\(return to text\)](#)

34. While the State Department had labored to bring Phoumi into Souvanna Phouma's coalition government, the CIA had maneuvered behind the scenes to keep Phoumi out of the coalition and supplied him with arms to topple the new regime. [\(return to text\)](#)

35. Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand. [\(return to text\)](#)

36. Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam," pp. 139-140. [\(return to text\)](#)

37. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, pp. 123-125. [\(return to text\)](#)

38. William Sullivan, *Obbligato: Notes on a Foreign Service Career* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), pp. 213, 210, 179-180, 220. [\(return to text\)](#)

39. Larteguy, *La Fabuleuse Aventure du Peuple du l'Opium*, p. 225. [\(return to text\)](#)

40. Warner, *Back Fire*, p. 76. [\(return to text\)](#)

41. Ibid., pp. 116-118. [\(return to text\)](#)

42. Ibid., p. 178. [\(return to text\)](#)

43. Ernest C. Kuhn, Oral history interview, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Georgetown University Library, 1988, p. 43. [\(return to text\)](#)

44. Among the Hmong we interviewed the prevailing view was that the Lao state and its political apparatus was fundamentally corrupt and hostile to the interests of the Hmong as a people. [\(return to text\)](#)

45. Robert Cooper, Nicholas Tap, Gary Lee, and Gretel Schwoer-Kohl, *The Hmong* (Bangkok: Artasia Press, 1991), p. 25. [\(return to text\)](#)

46. Robert D. Jenks, Robert D. 1994. *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The "Miao" Rebellion 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 36. [\(return to text\)](#)

47. The eighteen clans are: Yang, Vang, Vue, Xiong, Lo, Ly, Her, Moua, Hang, Kue, Khang, Fa, Chang, Thao, Chue, Cheng, Kong, and Pha. Hmong clans are probably as old as those of the Chinese. Jean Mottin claims there were originally only twelve Hmong clans (*Elements de Grammaire Hmong Blanc* (Khek Noy: Don Bosco Press, 1978), p. 157); Yang Dao limits the number to eight ("Why Did the Hmong Leave Laos?," translated by Sylvianne Downing in Bruce T. Downing and Douglas P. Olney (eds.), *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports* (Minneapolis, St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 3). Save for the Vue clan, which contains

only White Hmong, both Blue and White Hmong are represented in the eight larger clans. The lesser clans (Hang, Kue, Khang, Fa, Chang, Thao, Chue, Cheng, Kong, and Pha) are mostly Blue Hmong. [\(return to text\)](#)

48. Two institutions, exogamy and bride price, served as a counterweight to expand loyalties beyond clan. Marriages were always between clans, never within them, making marriage a natural leaven for the enlargement of attachments. Married women were quiet though effective spokespersons for their natal clan; and family gatherings with in-laws forged affective links that cut across clans. The bride price, paid by the groom's family to the bride's relatives, also diluted clan parochialism. Though the exact sum was set by custom and circumstance, unsettled disputes between clans could always affect the size of the final settlement. A wronged clan might demand a higher than normal bride price as remedy for perceived damages, drawing out the negotiations. Complaints would be heard, excuses or regrets offered in defense. To reach an accommodation both sides were compelled to present arguments that transcended selfish clan interests and addressed obligations acknowledged as legitimate by all Hmong, regardless of clan or tribe. See Yves Betrais, *The Traditional Marriage Among the White Hmong of Thailand and Laos* (Chiengmai, Thailand: Hmong Center, 1978), pp. 267-269. [\(return to text\)](#)

49. Larteguy, *La Fabuleuse Aventure du Peuple du l'Opium*, p. 224. [\(return to text\)](#)

50. Vang Pao also established a bureaucracy for Sam Neua, but the province was so often under enemy control it remained mostly a paper government. [\(return to text\)](#)

51. According to Tou Yer Moua ("Hmong Values and Political Leadership as Perceived by the U.S. Hmongs." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, United States International University, 1994), p. 38.), the new chao muongs were: Neng Thong Ly, Xiong Ly, Xa Chia Thao, Youa Tong Yang, and Geu Moua Noutoua Moua; once refugees swelled the population of Long Cheng to nearly fifty thousand souls, Vang Pao reorganized the town's civil administration to provide the different clans their fair share of office holders. [\(return to text\)](#)

52. Warner, *Back Fire*, p. 121. [\(return to text\)](#)

53. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, p. 274. [\(return to text\)](#)

54. Grant Evans, *The Yellow Rainmakers* (London: Verso Editions, 1983), p. 19. [\(return to text\)](#)

55. Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support*, p. 138. [\(return to text\)](#)

56. In 1988, Laos' communist regime persuaded the Thai government to confiscate Pa Chay Thao's holdings and transfer the assets to the Laotian government. Pa Chay Thao died penniless in a Thai refugee camp in 1991. [\(return to text\)](#)

57. Unit commanders also padded rosters to increase their own incomes. This abuse increased over the years as the salaries of chao muongs and tassengs outpaced those of top military officers. Vang Pao generally tolerated the corruption if a commander continued to win battles with fewer men; the delivery of military pay for the regular RLA

was more direct. Top commanders showed up at the Green House (CIA headquarters in Vientiane) where Marine guards unloaded bundles of kip from a warehouse onto the waiting trucks. Top RLA officers in charge of distributing the kip no doubt skimmed as much, and likely more, than did Vang Pao. [\(return to text\)](#)

58. Interview with Ger Vue (1993). [\(return to text\)](#)

59. Joseph Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes, and People: Opium and Its Use in Laos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 278. [\(return to text\)](#)

60. It was common knowledge that Vang Pao owned two homes in Vientiane to house his many wives and children. But Poe alleged Vang Pao also owned a Mercedes Benz, apartments, and hotels. See Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), pp. 318, 558 (note). [\(return to text\)](#)

61. Schanche, *Mr. Pop*, pp. 240-244. [\(return to text\)](#)

62. Marek Thee, *Notes of a Witness* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 112. [\(return to text\)](#)

63. Christopher Robbins, *Air America* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), p. 128. [\(return to text\)](#)

64. Schanche, *Mr. Pop*, p. 92. [\(return to text\)](#)

65. The Pathet Lao texts are mentioned in Warner, *Back Fire*,

p. 217. [\(return to text\)](#)

66. Yang Dao, *Hmong at the Turning Point*, edited by Jeannie Blake. (Minneapolis: Worldbridge Associates, 1993), p. 98. [\(return to text\)](#)

67. Kuhn, Oral History Interview, p. 24. [\(return to text\)](#)

68. The anthropologist Jan Ovesen found it took on average three days for a Hmong to clear a third of an acre of wilderness that was not heavily forested. If there were large trees, the time required was much longer. See Jan Ovesen, *A Minority Enters the Nation State* (Uppsala Research Reports in Cultural Anthropology. No. 14, 1995), p. 53. [\(return to text\)](#)

69. Warner, *Back Fire*, p. 177. [\(return to text\)](#)

70. For the same purpose, Vang Pao later arranged marriages between Touby's children and his own. [\(return to text\)](#)

71. For generations, relations between Hmong from Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang had been strained. The Sam Neua Hmong resented their caricature as artless rustics. The marriage was Vang Pao's attempt to break down this barrier of distrust and gain cooperation for his expanded guerrilla operations in the province. As it turned out, his new bride was overwhelmed by life in Long Cheng which was slowly evolving into the most densely populated Hmong settlement in Laos. She begged to be returned to her mountain village. By custom, returning a bride to her family was a breach of contract. The prescribed remedy was a fine. Vang Pao had already paid a substantial bride price for the woman. As a

good will gesture, he offered an even larger amount to indemnify the girl's parents for the loss of face and to maintain good relations. [\(return to text\)](#)

72. Vang Pao had earlier tried to draw these Moua clansmen into his guerrilla network but they wanted nothing to do with the war and permitted the Pathet Lao to operate freely in their district. To win them over, he hosted a large and lavish party in the town, a feast that lasted several days. During the festivities, a lovely Moua girl caught his eye and became his seventh wife. As with his Sam Neua wife, the swarming population of Long Cheng proved too much for the new bride and she had to be returned home. Vang Pao paid another large fine, sufficiently generous to soothe feelings and dispose the villagers of Tase to join the war effort. [\(return to text\)](#)

73. Though she would not be his last wife, Hmong fell into the habit of referring to her as "Maelot," the Laotian word for "last one." [\(return to text\)](#)

74. Zong was a nurse at the field hospital at Vang Vieng. Only fifteen, she caught Vang Pao's eye while he was visiting wounded soldiers. The two entered into a love affair even though Zong was already married to man from the Lo clan, Ma Lo. Zong's youthful blush may have animated Vang Pao's passion, but it was her family connections that prompted the marriage. [\(return to text\)](#)

75. Interview (1988) with a Hmong who wishes to remain anonymous. [\(return to text\)](#)

76. This is a pseudonym. [\(return to text\)](#)

77. Communication with Ger Vue (1992). [\(return to text\)](#)

78. Gary Y. Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong." in Martin Stuart-Fox (ed.), *Contemporary Laos* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 219 (note). [\(return to text\)](#)

79. Interview with Bouayeng Vang (1992). [\(return to text\)](#)

80. As the war progressed, disaffection spread among Hmong units in the Pathet Lao. In addition to many desertions, some units actually planned to surrender to Vang Pao's forces, but as they were seldom allowed to engage Royalist Hmong units, they never had the opportunity (interview with Xia Vang Vue, 1993). [\(return to text\)](#)

81. Interviews with Fu Ly (1993) and Nao Ying Yang (1992); Leng Vue survived the war and immigrated to the United States. Still fearing a reprisal for joining the Neutralists, he changed his name (1993 interview with a member of the Vue clan who wishes to remain anonymous). [\(return to text\)](#)

82. Toufu Vang was one of the few Vang who had already been educated abroad. He was quickly promoted through the ranks of the army and then relieved of duty to spend full time cultivating Vang Pao's business concerns. He developed a distribution network for the sale of western goods, a sales region that eventually encompassed Long Cheng, Ban Some, Pha Khao, and Muong Cha. [\(return to text\)](#)

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