

The University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

General Vang Pao: A Torn Legacy

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Abstract

General Vang Pao has been a controversial figure since his alliance with the CIA to fight off Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops during the Secret War in Laos. Scholars and reporters have asserted that General Vang Pao has committed atrocities, exploited his fellow Hmong, and doesn't deserve the recognition of being considered a "hero" for his contributions to the Hmong community. Historians have been passionate about their opinions about General Vang Pao and his legacy; many books have been written about him and have contested viewpoints about his actions in the context of war and exile in America. General Vang Pao's legacy is determined through the historical context of which writings and reports were published; this paper will distinguish ambiguities of these writings to provide a clear perspective about his life. The sources consulted will consist of scholarly books by those who have written extensively about General Vang Pao, newspaper articles about how he is depicted in media, personal interviews from CIA allies, and book reviews from those involved in the scholarly war.

Introduction

General Vang Pao's legacy has been a subject of speculation since his rise of military career within Laos, by members of the Hmong community and historical scholars writing about the Secret Wars in Laos. He has been portrayed as a heroic tribal and military leader of the Hmong in both Laos and the America. General Vang Pao has also faced many accusations as being a corrupt leader, engaging in illegal activities of selling drugs, inciting insurgencies within Laos, stealing money from Hmong donations, and being a puppet of the American CIA. The

interpretation about General Vang Pao varies from individual perspective, causing controversy in evaluating the way history will remember him.

General Vang Pao is an imperfect man who acted in accordance to what he believed was best for his people. Historical interpretation of his legacy and impact upon the world will be based off the paradigm of those writing about him and his involvement in events since the Secret War in Laos. The manner in which he will be remembered is still left open for interpretation, and individuals personally involved with General Vang Pao and scholars have sought to have his legacy remembered through their respective paradigm.

When talking about General Vang Pao, scholars and historians have been very passionate about their opinions of him and have argued their perspective within scholarly works and through media outlets. These conflicts result in those being interested in studying General Vang Pao to become conflicted with which scholars to believe in interpreting his life and legacy. This paper will examine prominent scholarly writings, personal experiences, and media reporting about General Vang Pao's life and how his legacy has changed through time and events. This paper will also argue that those who have written and reported about General Vang Pao have been generally skewed by personal associations, diplomatic goals, and perceptions of controversial events based on historical context; this paper will seek to examine the ambiguities of these works and how his legacy varies based upon which interpretation is perceived as legitimate.

Vang Pao was born in 1931 in Laos alongside the Vietnamese border and was a son of peasant farming family within the Vang clan. Vang Pao began his military career by fighting the

Japanese in World War II at the age of 14, and assisted French troops resisting the Japanese invasion. After the war ended, Vang Pao enlisted into the national police in 1950, which was controlled at the time by imperial power France. He would then enroll in officer candidate school taught by the French, which would provide military training and inclusion in future operations.

At Dienbienphu in Vietnam in 1954, Vietminh soldiers surrounded the French Expeditionary Corps and destroyed the based, ending the imperial French rule of Vietnam. After the fall of Dienbienphu, Vang Pao became a major within the Royal Army in 1959, while Laos launched into civil war between the Pathet Lao (communists supported by North Vietnam) and the Royalists (anticommunists).¹ In an effort to prevent the Domino theory of Southeast Asia falling to communism, the CIA arranged a meeting in 1958 with the capable Vang Pao and offered military assistance and tactical support to resist the communists.² After roughly 14 years of assisting the Hmong during civil war within Laos, the United States withdrew from the region, leaving now General Vang Pao alone to fight against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops.³ General Vang Pao would also soon leave Laos under the advice of the CIA to escape capture from the Pathet Lao, bringing his family and closest associates with him to Thailand, and eventually America.⁴ General Vang Pao's personal background was not touched upon until later works about him were produced, and is essential information to understand in forming a perspective about him.

¹ Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (South Royalton: Steerforth, 1998), 26-29.

² Paul Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society), 82-85.

³ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: the Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 330.

⁴ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 268, 351.

General Vang Pao became an American citizen, where he along with many of the other Hmong refugees who came with settled in California. While in exile from Laos, General Vang Pao served as the tribal leader of the Hmong refugees and created organizations such as Neo Hom in an attempt to help the Hmong populations.⁵ General Vang Pao would spend a great deal of his time in America as an advocate for Hmong rights and raise awareness for the atrocities committed against the Hmong in Laos. General Vang Pao died on January 6th, 2011, never again being able to fulfill his dreams of returning to his homeland in Laos.⁶

Since the conclusion of the Secret War in Laos, scholars within history and reporters have published books and articles depicting the role that General Vang Pao played in Laos and America. After consulting the major works conducted about General Vang Pao, it is apparent that scholars and reporters writing about the General have very different opinions on his legacy. The portrayals of General Vang Pao differ immensely, ranging from being depicted as an honorable war hero to being viewed as a corrupt leader who murdered and exploited the Hmong people. Analyzing and interpreting these various scholars and reporter's work is critical in developing a concise viewpoint about General Vang Pao and the legacy in which he lived his life.

One of central controversies that are commonly associated with General Vang Pao had been accusations of being involved in opium trade during the Secret War in Laos. Another common accusation is cases of executions of soldiers or civilians refusing to fight or being accused of being a traitor. There are other controversies and accusations made in various

⁵ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 382.

⁶ Douglas Martin, "Gen. Vang Pao, Laotian Who Aided U.S., Dies at 81," http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/08/world/asia/08vangpao.html?_r=1 (accessed 21 October, 2011).

works, but these are two are the most addressed by scholars. The interpretation and speculation of involvement of the controversies vary depending on which works are read and manner in which they are addressed. Other factors in the depiction of General Vang Pao's controversial acts is the time period it happened, political conflicts domestically and abroad, and his power of influence at the time.

The historiography that are the most influential in determining the legacy and perception of General Vang Pao are predominately from historians. Dr. Alfred McCoy is a history professor at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, who wrote The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia. CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade and makes accusations critical of General Vang Pao during the Secret War in Laos. Dr. Paul Hilmer is also a history professor who teaches at the Concordia University, and wrote A People's History of the Hmong, focusing General Vang Pao's life both in Laos and the United States. Dr. Roger Warner is a historian who wrote Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos and also addresses General Vang Pao's activities during and after the war. Jane Hamilton-Merritt is a journalist who reported from Laos during the Secret Wars and Thailand refugee camps in her book Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos 1942-1992; Hamilton-Merritt builds General Vang Pao as a heroic figure fighting for the survival of his people. Dr. Chia Vang is a history professor who teaches at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee and wrote her book, Hmong America, which focuses on the history of the Hmong since their migration to the United States and issues within the Hmong community. Each author has made significant contributions towards the history of General Vang Pao and presents various opinions based off of their research and individual perspective.

The War Years and Migration

General Vang Pao's ascension to power and heroism stems from his service in the Royal Lao military assisting French troops and fighting Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces through U.S. support. He was willing to assist other nations in fighting communists from within Laos and neighboring Vietnam, and having a military officer who would engage in guerrilla warfare proved valuable to western nations. The French provided General Vang Pao with his initial training in an officer candidate school and led to his promotion within the Royal Lao Army.⁷ General Vang Pao would continue to receive guns and ammunition to fight the Vietminh, which raised his stature among the Hmong and displayed that he was able to provide resources to fight.⁸ His influence would continue to grow until the French were forced to leave the region after their defeat by the Vietminh Dienbienphu.

Bill Lair, a CIA advisor who trained Thai national police to defend against potential communist take over from neighboring China and Vietnam, directed his attention towards Laos in 1958. The CIA wanted to do anything within their power to stop the communist Pathet Lao from taking over, and sought to find a resistance group to fight if a war were to break out within Laos. Lair met General Vang Pao in 1958, and established a partnership with him to arm and train Hmong guerrillas to fight the Pathet Lao. Although a written agreement was never presented, General Vang Pao was under the assumption that the CIA would provide the Hmong with safe refuge if they lost the war. Lair would later assert that no promises were made for safe refuge if they Hmong lost the war. General Vang Pao agreed to accept the CIA assistance

⁷ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 28.

⁸ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 52.

in fighting the Pathet Lao, and the Secret War in Laos began.⁹ The support for General Vang Pao by the CIA empowered his stature within the Hmong community and was viewed by many as a tribal leader of the Hmong.

As escalation of military advisors and troops began in Southern Vietnam to stop North Vietnam taking over the south and becoming communist in the 1960s, the Secret War in Laos expanded tremendously. General Vang Pao's significance increased because the CIA depended on the Hmong resistance to defend Laos from Pathet Lao takeover and fight North Vietnamese and Vietcong on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With supplies and pay for Hmong soldiers being provided by the CIA, General Vang Pao and the Hmong fought North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces until the evacuation of all U.S. personnel in Vietnam in 1975.¹⁰ As a result, the Hmong were unable to continue resistance against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops, and were forced to flee Laos to Thailand to escape persecution and revenge from communist forces. General Vang Pao himself was forced to flee on May 14, 1975, along with his family and military commanders to Thailand.¹¹

General Vang Pao was generally an unknown figure outside of Laos, but gained recognition within American media news outlets on January 19, 1961 when he pleaded for assistance against the communist Pathet Lao. The news outlet referred to him as "Lt. Vang Pao" and depicts him as a military leader of the "Meo" who have to fight to protect their

⁹ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 80-85.

¹⁰ The Hmong battles against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces employed guerrilla warfare to combat the superior weapons and manpower that communist forces possessed. The CIA provided almost all of the funding for the operation, and with the high casualties suffered by American forces and outcry against the Vietnam War, the United States was chose to withdraw all troops and CIA officials from the region. U.S. political leaders sought an honorable exit from Vietnam at all costs, and cut all funding and manpower away from the Hmong for the war in Laos.

¹¹ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 349, 356.

homes.¹² This portrayal of General Vang Pao was most likely positive because the United States was entrenched in the Cold War, and sought alliances with populations who attempted to resist the spread of communism. The article was one of the first references to the Hmong and their effort to resist and fight communist forces.¹³ Most of the newspaper articles following described battles within Laos, and were generally positive in regards to General Vang Pao; in one article, he is referred to as a “demigod” to Hmong and is the only hope for the Hmong to resist communist forces.¹⁴

Alfred McCoy’s The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia. CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade was the first scholarly work that provided extensive coverage of General Vang Pao and his role during the Secret War in Laos. McCoy published his book in 1973, and his intention was to outline various events that implicate the CIA being complicit with opium trade and supporting leaders who sell opium for their own political gain. His coverage of the CIA focuses one chapter on Laos, where McCoy mentions General Vang Pao as the chosen leader to mobilize an army to fight communist forces. McCoy asserts that the CIA had to sustain General Vang Pao’s power by providing air support in transporting Lao’s cash crop, opium, and funds to pay Hmong soldiers. While fighting against communist forces, McCoy argues that General Vang Pao used American air power to send his troops to slaughter and pocketed funds provided by the CIA for Hmong volunteers.¹⁵

¹² The Hmong used to be referred as “Meo,” which was originally a Chinese word meaning “slave”. “Meo” in modern times is a highly offensive term to refer to Hmong populations and the Hmong take offense to references made in the past about who they were as a people.

¹³ “Laos Army Woos Aid of Hill People,” *Pasadena Independent*, (Pasadena) 19 January 1961.

¹⁴ “Hanoi Menaces Northern Laos, Refugees Flee,” *Charleston Daily Mail* (Charleston), 25 March 1968, p. 1.

¹⁵ Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), 290-291, 309

General Vang Pao's is depicted as an individual whose power was legitimized by the CIA assistance in controlling the opium trade in Laos and the only person who could use aircraft to transport crops.¹⁶ McCoy describes General Vang Pao's military leadership as being complicit in high casualty rates, executing prisoners of war, and even his own soldiers who wouldn't fight. In describing General Vang Pao's service through CIA backing, McCoy attempts to conceptualize American ambitions to subvert communist agendas in foreign nations within Cold War politics. This polarized view of General Vang Pao is used by McCoy to argue that the CIA turned a blind eye on opium trade to advance their agenda and uses poorly supported credible evidence. The evidence that Alfred McCoy provides is through a series of interviews of CIA officials, Hmong officials in Laos, and other unnamed sources; generally, these viewpoints of General Vang Pao are from his opponents and will say whatever they can to subvert his power.¹⁷ For scholarly research, this was one of the first books published that featured extensive coverage on General Vang Pao and would spark controversy for future works to come.

Carl Struck, writer for the Associated Press, also wrote newspaper articles in 1972 outlining General Vang Pao's involvement in the opium trade and the role in which the CIA played. Struck writes it is "asserted, naturally without proof" that General Vang Pao received assistance from Air America to transport poppy seeds and fly them out of the area. Despite implicating General Vang Pao in the opium trade, Struck depicts him as primarily a soldier and cites that American officials believed that he was the only dependable field commander in Laos. Aside from Alfred McCoy's book, this was the only newspaper article during the war in Laos in

¹⁶ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, 291, 308, 320.

¹⁷ This conclusion is based off of the sources provided in the "Notes" section at the end of the book, providing little to no scholarly work on the subject.

which General Vang Pao was cited as being involved in the drug trade. That being said, Struck made the argument, but didn't signify the opium trade as being detrimental to the Hmong and that General Vang Pao had earned a reputation of honesty and effectiveness on the battlefield.¹⁸

At the conclusion of the war in Laos, General Vang Pao, his family, and his top military associates were forced to migrate to neighboring Thailand. After one month in Thailand, General Vang Pao was informed by the Thai government that he must leave the country, and would eventually move to the United States.¹⁹ General Vang Pao would begin his life in exile, originally farming in Montana, then moving to Santa Ana, California to support incoming Hmong refugees.²⁰ As reported in *California Living Magazine*, General Vang Pao sought to help over 12,000 Hmong refugees assimilate to American culture and represent his people in America.²¹ General Vang Pao would eventually settle in Minnesota alongside the growing Hmong refugee populations and would continue to help the Hmong assimilate to American culture.

In an effort to research the new Hmong refugee population settling within the Twin Cities area, journalist Ruth Hammond wrote a three-part news article to help native populations understand who the Hmong were. Hammond interviewed hundreds of Hmong families who were dependent on welfare and government assistance programs to survive, and made a

¹⁸ Carl Struck, "Gen. Vang Pao – Most Hated, Admired Man in Laotian Mountains," *Iowa City Press* (Iowa City), 16 February 1972, p. 61.

¹⁹ "CIA General to Lose Haven," *Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison), 15 June 1975, p. 35.

²⁰ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 382.

²¹ David M. Abramson, "The Hmong: A Mountain Tribe Regroups in the Valley," *California Living Magazine* 29 (January, 1984), 9-12.

startling revelation about Hmong charitable donations. Hammond reported the Hmong were dedicating at least \$10 per month to General Vang Pao's resistance group, citing that he promised they would return to Laos after the defeat of communist forces. The Hmong remained quiet about this issue, fearing repercussions from Hmong leaders in the community. The story was published in the *Twin City Reader* in 1989, and would come back to damage General Vang Pao's credibility within the Hmong community.²²

The Secret War in Laos Revealed

Until the 1990s, major scholarly research into the United States' role in Laos during the Vietnam War lacked significant coverage and scholars began to produce more works on the topic. In doing so, historians and other commentators on the topic consulted officials and those who fought in the war to provide information. These inquiries resulted in a dynamic paradigm shift from the way scholars had viewed General Vang Pao previously, who had a brief mention in earlier works about his role within the war. Jane Hamilton-Merritt and Roger Warner produced books that addressed General Vang Pao significantly, and changed the manner in which he would be remembered as a military commander leading the Hmong against communist forces.

Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt is a highly acclaimed journalist who has received many accolades for her work in writing *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos 1942-1992*. Hamilton-Merritt reported from Southeast Asia from the mid-1960s to 1976, writing reports about fighting Vietnam, Laos, and coverage of Thai refugee camps for

²² Ruth Hammond, "Strangers in a Strange Land: Minnesota's Trouble Hmong," *Twin City Reader* (June 7, 1988): 1-18.

displaced Hmong populations from Laos.²³ She sought to write her book covering the Secret War in Laos through narratives from those who lived in the region during the war, placing emphasis on General Vang Pao's story. Jane Hamilton-Merritt writes her narrative of General Vang Pao as a "war hero" and that he fought to protect his people from communism. Hamilton-Merritt's argument is to acknowledge the heroic nature in which General Vang Pao led Hmong forces against Pathet Lao oppressors, and provides evidence from over 1,000 interviews from American, French, and Hmong people involved in the war.²⁴

In contrast to earlier writings of Alfred McCoy on General Vang Pao, Jane Hamilton-Merritt paints a completely different perspective about him based upon the interviews she conducts with those involved. Some of the allegations that are made by McCoy are dealt with in her book and addresses these claims with a different perspective. Hamilton-Merritt does mention in her book that General Vang Pao did order the execution of one of his soldiers, citing that "traitors were dealt with harshly in Laos" and executed one of his soldiers on suspicion of treason.²⁵ It can be noted that this passage isn't mentioned in the index and is signified very briefly within the book. The interpretation of this fact is to show the Hamilton-Merritt didn't want to perpetuate negative connotation towards the General and limited negative reports within her book.

Another allegation that is briefly mentioned in her book is the cultivation and usage of opium by Hmong populations during the Secret Wars. Hamilton-Merritt addresses the argument about General Vang Pao's involvement in the opium trade with pure denial; she

²³ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, XVI-XVIII.

²⁴ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 563.

²⁵ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 98.

claims that opium was the main cash crop for communists within Laos.²⁶ She also briefly mentions in her book that the Hmong populations didn't have access to opium because General Vang Pao didn't want people to grow it.²⁷ Hamilton-Merritt's narrative about General Vang Pao is highly controversial because it clashed with other writings about his role in certain activities and supplemented predominately interviews as evidence.

Jane Hamilton-Merritt's book received a lot of praise and criticism from various scholars in the academic world, and Alfred McCoy reviewed her book upon publication in *The Journal of Asian Studies* in August, 1993. McCoy wrote a very harsh review of Hamilton-Merritt's book, stating that Hamilton-Merritt seeks to provide vindication for General Vang Pao's execution of soldiers and she provides unjustified praise for him. McCoy also states that Hamilton-Merritt ignored crucial issues within the Hmong community, including accusations that General Vang Pao was extorting money from poor Hmong families for resistance operations in Laos and abandoning Hmong refugees still in Thailand. His final point is that rather than making General Vang Pao out to be the courageous leader, Hamilton-Merritt actually proved the contention that he led the Hmong into the battlefield for slaughter.²⁸ Another new interpretation of General Vang Pao would be written by Roger Warner three years later.

Roger Warner's Shooting at the Moon depiction of the Secret Wars in Laos features General Vang Pao throughout the book, addressing his contributions during the war and his activities abroad. Roger Warner makes an active effort to address criticisms and controversy

²⁶ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 398.

²⁷ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 423.

²⁸ Alfred McCoy, "Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans, and the Secret War for Laos, 1942-1992 by Jane Hamilton-Merritt Reviewed by Alfred McCoy," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (August, 1993) 777-780.

surrounding General Vang Pao. Warner addresses claims of General Vang Pao's involvement in the opium trade, but signifies that it wasn't an important issue aside from CIA disapproval of opium possession. Opium possession in Laos was a legal trade, and Warner acknowledges that General Vang Pao was in possession of opium under his house. Warner goes further by indicating that General Vang Pao wanted to sell the opium to raise funds for supplies, but restrains from doing so as the CIA threatened to withdraw support.²⁹ General Vang Pao also tried to control the opium shipping market in an effort to consolidate power, but realized it wasn't worth it to compromise CIA funding.³⁰ Warner cites that opponents of General Vang Pao such as Tony Poe spread rumors of General Vang Pao being involved in the opium trade, but only did so to hurt the General's reputation.³¹

Warner spends some of the book addressing clan rivalries and issues of preference being deferred to those close to General Vang Pao. Warner doesn't address the issue of execution of Hmong soldiers in his work, leaving out a central argument seen in all the other works. Another factor that plays into Warner's book is that it is somewhat dated, leaving out information about his arrest in 2007 and other issues of attempting to overthrow the communist government within Laos. That being said, Roger Warner's portrayal of controversies surrounding General Vang Pao are addressed but are severely downplayed, signifying that Warner can be viewed as a general support of General Vang Pao.

Roger Warner's book was originally published as Backfire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the Vietnam War, and Alfred McCoy reviewed Warner's book for the *Pacific*

²⁹ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 81.

³⁰ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 116.

³¹ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 264.

Affairs journal at the University of British Columbia in 1996.³² McCoy wrote a review critical of Warner's work, stating that Warner wrote purely from the American viewpoint with little consultation given to Laotian sources. McCoy writes that Warner's story is "at the most elementary level," very biased, and doesn't address political and moral issues created during the war in Laos. Warner's book also centers on from the viewpoint of former CIA operative Bill Lair, who worked extensively with General Vang Pao during the war; McCoy states with a condescending tone that Bill Lair would eventually become an "interstate truck driver" and is written to devalue Lair's input on the war in Laos.³³

Jane Hamilton-Merritt and Roger Warner attempted to tell the story of the war in Laos after the conflict was over and reinterpreted perspectives of those involved. Although clearly biased in favor of General Vang Pao, Jane Hamilton-Merritt sought to change the paradigm in which General Vang Pao would be viewed in both the scholarly arena and national public. Roger Warner used American narratives about General Vang Pao to acknowledge controversies and dispel the severity in which they were portrayed in Alfred McCoy's book. Although McCoy slammed both authors in scholarly review of their works, each author was successful in bringing new inquiry into an individual who is generally revered by the Hmong and American political leaders. Dr. Paul Hilmer's study about General Vang Pao is the latest scholarly book to attempt to dissect the controversy surrounding him.

America and General Vang Pao's Death

³² The book was later renamed to *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* after this original edition was published. Both books are almost identical in material with a few revisions and some updated information.

³³ Alfred McCoy, "Backfire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the Vietnam War Reviewed by Alfred McCoy," *Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia* 69, no. 2 (Summer, 1996):284-286.

Paul Hilmer's A People's History of the Hmong is the most recent publication focusing on information about General Vang Pao's life in Laos predominately, and addressing controversies while in exile. Hilmer identifies virtually all the controversies that have shrouded the General and provides insightful information about each topic in context of broader events happening during the timeframe. In identifying the claim by Al McCoy executing his own soldiers, Hilmer addresses the issue by stating that General Vang Pao did use brutal tactics even among his soldiers, but it was a rare occasion. Executing his own soldiers was a byproduct of association of betrayal and being a traitor, and execution was justified because the General was often working with other corrupt officers.³⁴ Hilmer makes it very clear that these tactics were brutal in nature and not honorable, but are understandable in dire situation in which General Vang Pao was placed in. In relation to accusations of General Vang Pao being an opium dealer, Hilmer doesn't address the issue directly in his book. Based upon personal conversations with Dr. Hilmer, the issue of the opium trade was assumedly irrelevant because it is commonly known that opium cultivation in Southeast Asia is common and the accusation of opium dealing is fruitless based on cultural customs in Laos.

One of the major controversies General Vang Pao faced in America was accusations of corrupt fundraising, predominately through his organization Neo Hom. Neo Hom was originally created in 1981 as a movement that was inspired to support the overthrow the communist government in Laos.³⁵ The organization utilized fundraising from Hmong families for support; through further, inquiry it was displayed that contributors to Neo Hom paid significant amounts

³⁴ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 143.

³⁵ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 161.

of money for positions with the new Laotian government after General Vang Pao took over. Most of the contributors to Neo Hom were on welfare because they hadn't yet successfully assimilated to American culture, and led to anger within the Hmong community when the overthrow never happened. Although Hilmer is skeptical about the true nature of General Vang Pao's involvement, he does suggest that it is possible that close associates of the General used his name to endorse money from within the Hmong community.³⁶

Roger Warner also spends time focusing on General Vang Pao's activities in America, where he asserts that the General's supporters systematically used Neo Hom for personal economic gain.³⁷ Accusations were made that contributions raised for Neo Hom had half of their money stolen by Neo Hom members themselves, and the other half being shipped to Thailand.³⁸ Since General Vang Pao was a leader within the organization, he was naturally accused of being responsible for the corruption. Warner contends that General Vang Pao should be exonerated from implications of involvement of money embezzlement and shifted the blame for corrupt practices towards the individuals profiting from his name.

Dr. Chia Vang, who recently published her book Hmong America, provides a Hmong perspective on the topic of Neo Hom and how it was viewed through the Hmong community in Minnesota. Vang asserts that Neo Hom was established to emphasize that America wasn't the true home for the Hmong, but stressed the importance of returning to Laos after the fall of the Pathet Lao. She acknowledges that the organization was a front to provide financial support to those fighting the Pathet Lao in Laos, and that members of the Hmong community were misled

³⁶ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 270-282.

³⁷ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 383-384.

³⁸ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 384.

about the progress of resistance. Vang states that Neo Hom used these practices to unify younger generation of Hmong and to maintain the goal of returning to their homeland. From her perspective from within the Hmong community, most of the Hmong still acknowledged General Vang Pao's leadership and importance; most of the dissenters from his leadership consisted of younger generation Hmong who believe that his role is irrelevant in America.³⁹ Although General Vang Pao's active role within the Hmong community was diminishing, he would still be at the center of controversy in Hmong community issues.

In 2007, Madison school officials were considering naming a new elementary school in honor of General Vang Pao and his actions during the Secret War in Laos as a military commander for the Hmong. Alfred McCoy was an outspoken advocate against the proposal and produced an editorial piece for a condemning the honoring of General Vang Pao. McCoy is referenced as previously referring to General Vang Pao as a "Judas goat" who led to people to slaughter, and then would step aside. McCoy reasserted his accusations made in his book and gave interviews about General Vang Pao establishing heroin labs, forcing teenagers to fight in battle, and utilizing Air America planes to transport heroin.⁴⁰

As a response to Alfred McCoy's public outcry against General Vang Pao, Dr. Gary Yia Lee of Concordia University wrote a letter contesting McCoy's allegations and provided transcripts to online news outlets. Lee argues that McCoy's accusations stem upon rivals of General Vang Pao in separate parts of Laos, questions McCoy's scholarly approach in researching about General Vang Pao, and offers to travel with McCoy to Laos as an interpreter

³⁹ Chia Vang, *Hmong America* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2010): 137-141.

⁴⁰ Eisen, Marc, "Vang Pao Elementary School Opening in Madison," *The Daily Page* (April, 2007): <http://www.thedailypage.com/daily/article.php?article=6267> (accessed 12/1/11).

to obtain the truth. McCoy responded publicly to Lee's letter that he wasn't interested in traveling back to Laos, reaffirms his research done in Laos, the criminality of General Vang Pao's executions, and recommends other Hmong individuals to name the school after.⁴¹ McCoy's public outbursts against General Vang Pao display that his contention against General Vang Pao still holds to this day and fosters resentment between McCoy and the Hmong community. In that same year, General Vang Pao would also be arrested for his alleged involvement in creating insurgency within communist-led Laos.

One of the other most significant controversies stems from the arrest of General Vang Pao in 2007, where he and his associates were infiltrated by an undercover ATF (Arms, Tobacco, Firearms) agent attempting to sell weapons and mercenaries for their campaign in Laos.⁴² Hilmer asserts that the arrest was a byproduct of post 9/11 fears of terrorism that inspired the Homeland Security to launch the investigation.⁴³ Dr. Chia Vang agrees with Hilmer about how the events of 9/11 redefined the United States viewpoint on groups such as Neo Hom, and sparked this investigation.⁴⁴ Hilmer also assess that the reality of General Vang Pao obtaining weapons and mercenaries to overthrow the government in Laos was a "delusional fantasy," and obviously refutes any legitimacy to the claim.⁴⁵

Paul Hilmer's position on General Vang Pao presents most of the controversial claims associated with General Vang Pao and provides insight upon each occurrence. Rather than

⁴¹ Eisen, Marc, "McCoy Challenged on Pao; he Fires back," *The Daily Page* (April, 2007): <http://www.thedailypage.com/daily/article.php?article=6376> (accessed 12/1/11).

⁴² United States, "District Court. Eastern District of California. *United States of America vs. General Vang Pao*," (Sacramento, 2007): 4-10.

⁴³ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 293.

⁴⁴ Chia Vang, *Hmong America*, 139.

⁴⁵ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 293.

taking a black and white approach, Hilmer identifies that each specific issue is complex in nature and there is a lot of grey area in interpretations. Hilmer presents the situation and allows the reader to create their own viewpoint about each accusation. As a result, Hilmer provides a critical yet mostly neutral portrayal of General Vang Pao. In regards to General Vang Pao's legacy, Hilmer explains that after his arrest in 2007, the General's legacy was forever tarnished; the Hmong community would acknowledge his work in Laos but for little else.⁴⁶

In the latter years of General Vang Pao's life, Dr. Chia Vang argues that General Vang Pao's significance within the Hmong community diminishes over time due to resentment from younger generations of the Hmong. Issues such as Neo Hom fundraising practices being exposed has cause a split within the Hmong community, and some Hmong reacted violently towards General Vang Pao's family. There were instances of shootings, firebombing, and demonstrations against General Vang Pao and his family; his son's home was destroyed in 2003. Despite these personal attacks on General Vang Pao, many of the elder Hmong believe that he is important in Hmong history and owe personal allegiance for his leadership during the civil war in Laos. General Vang Pao is regarded for his military service, and has provided speeches thanking those who fought for him in Laos and advocated recognition for Hmong soldiers.⁴⁷ Most of the contributors to scholarly writing about General Vang Pao weren't directly involved in day-to-day operations during the war in Laos and CIA operatives have their own paradigm about the man he was.

Remembrance

⁴⁶ Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 299.

⁴⁷ Vang, *Hmong America*, 127, 137-141.

The incorporation of American aid towards the Hmong during the Secret War in Laos consisted predominately of CIA officers, serving in assistance towards General Vang Pao in supplies, tactics, and air support. Many of the CIA officers serving in Laos spent extensive time in the region, and had a lot of interaction with General Vang Pao throughout the war. Dr. Paul Hilmer of Concordia University in St. Paul conducted and allowed the usage of his interviews to be used; these interviews are used in order to provide their perspective about General Vang Pao's character and how they remembered their experience while fighting alongside General Vang Pao and the Hmong.

J. Vinton ("Vint") Lawrence was recruited by the CIA and arrived in Laos in February, 1962, and would end up serving two tours in Laos, training Hmong soldiers and serving alongside Bill Lair. Vint Lawrence spent his time in Laos training Hmong soldiers to fight and lived with General Vang Pao, providing consultation of strategy and assistance to the General. Vint describes General Vang Pao as a very charismatic leader and considers what happened to the General a "tragedy"; Vint states that the incorporation of American military capabilities changed the dynamic in which the General would fight the remainder of the war. In regards to the opium trade, Vint states that General Vang Pao had possession of the drug and used it in trade or as a backup measure to ensure the payment of his troops. He would later state that General Vang Pao despised the drug, not allowing his troops to fight if they were using opium.

One of the strongest arguments made against General Vang Pao is his role within the opium drug trade; Al McCoy asserts that General Vang Pao was a drug kingpin. Lawrence's interview acknowledges the implication of the opium trade within Laos, but displays that the

opium trade was insignificant and only served the purpose of emergency funding for the General's troops. When asked about how General Vang Pao should be viewed on a moral compass, Vint asserts that the General made mistakes and the perception of the General varies by age; he also states that within the Hmong community in St. Paul, "you either love him or hate him." The interpretation of the interview displays that Vint is a strong supporter of General Vang Pao, and that it will take long time before he will be seen in the "proper light" within the Hmong community.⁴⁸

Mike Lynch was a CIA paramilitary officer who had also served in Laos from 1963 through 1967, and spent a lot of time alongside General Vang Pao. Evaluating General Vang Pao's capability on the battlefield, Lynch describes Pao as the "right man for the time in Northern Laos" and knew the realities of fighting a war with his native population. Lynch also stated that he believed General Vang Pao was "a remarkable man" and that he never considered Pao to be "corrupt". Lynch further states that if General Vang Pao siphoned money to assist his family, it was consider "small potatoes" in the context of greater corruptions seen in other Asian countries.⁴⁹ Mike Lynch's disposition of General Vang Pao showed that he had great admiration for the General, and believes that he was an honorable man.

B. Hugh Tovar was the CIA station chief in Laos from 1970 to 1973, and also knew General Vang Pao well through the latter years of the Secret Wars.⁵⁰ As first impression, Tovar described General Vang Pao as an "impressive guy" and was known to have strong support

⁴⁸ Vint Lawrence, Interviewed by Paul Hilmer and Anne Garrels, Edited by Paul Hilmer, 17 July 2006, Transcribed by Paul Hilmer, Transcript of tape recording, Concordia University, St. Paul, MN, 1 – 8.

⁴⁹ Mike Lynch, Interviewed by Paul Hilmer. 22 and 23 July 2006, Edited by Mike Lynch, Transcript of tape recording, Concordia University, St. Paul, MN, 1- 6.

⁵⁰ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 315.

from his people. Tovar remarked that General Vang Pao was very gifted in his ability to lead and be a soldier for his people; he also exclaimed how the General was completely dedicated to his people and he would be the first to enlist if the Americans chose to go back to Laos and fight. Tovar would spend the rest of interview describing in great detail the vast capabilities of General Vang Pao on the battlefield and his dedication to fighting for his people.

The CIA operatives who were interviewed shared great admiration for General Vang Pao and his role in fighting for the Hmong during the Secret War in Laos. Vint Lawrence and Mike Lynch addressed potential issues of corruption by the General, but asserted that accusations against the General were ill-founded and didn't matter in the larger context of the war. Hugh Tovar regarded General Vang Pao as an "imperfect man," but shows that his personal experience with the General reasserts his stature of being a great leader for the Hmong.⁵¹

General Vang Pao died on January 6th, 2011 from complications with pneumonia at the age of 81 after celebrating the Hmong New Year in Fresno, California. His funeral lasted six days, being attended by friends, family, former soldiers, and political leaders within both the Hmong community and the American government. Despite the impact General Vang Pao has had in America, the family's request to be buried in Arlington with other American servicemen was denied by the Pentagon. The Hmong community and those who served with General Vang

⁵¹ Hugh Tovar, Interviewed by Paul Hilmer, 15 and 16 August 2007, Transcribed by Diane Schuessler, Transcript of tape recording, Concordia University, St. Paul, MN, 1, 9-10.

Pao mourned the death of the tribal leader, and gave many speeches about legacy in which he lived his life.⁵²

Dr. Lee Pao Xiong of Concordia University attended the funeral services and interviewed many prominent Hmong leaders and individuals who fought with him during the war in Laos.⁵³ In reflection of the Hmong community response to General Vang Pao's death, former CIA station chief Hugh Tovar proclaims "a society itself, rising up to honor it's hero, because he was a hero, and he's a hero to me". Tou Ger Xiong, a Hmong actor, proclaims that General Vang Pao "created a legacy, something to will be remembered not just years from now, but centuries from now" in describing the advancement of opportunities for the Hmong in America. Even Dr. Yang Dao, the first Hmong to ever get a Ph. D. and was at times an opponent of General Vang Pao, praised him for his leadership and what he was able to do for the Hmong community. This is only a small sampling of the impact that General Vang Pao had among the Hmong and American population.⁵⁴ He will be continued to be viewed as a hero by most people for his contributions to the United States and the Hmong; he enabled the Hmong to survive and thrive after war in Laos and will be revered by most as the father of Hmong America.

Conclusion

Each of the authors mentioned in the historiography has contributed in creating the narrative of General Vang Pao's life has had differing opinions about his actions and involvement in controversial issues. Al McCoy's perception conveyed in his book is the most

⁵² Arax, Mark, "For a Hmong Hero, a Lavish Farewell," *The New York Times* (February, 2011): <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/07/us/07hmong.html> (accessed 11/29/11).

⁵³ Dr. Lee Pao Xiong is in the process of making a video remembering General Vang Pao, and has granted permission to use interview excerpts from his video.

⁵⁴ *A Tribute to General Vang Pao*, prod. and dir. by Dr. Gary Yia Lee and Moua Lee, 11 min. 30 sec., 2011, Vimeo.

damaging of all, by taking a complex situation of opium trade during the Secret Wars and making it a black and white matter; this ultimately resulted in the beginnings of controversy around the General, and Al McCoy has continued since the publication of his book to speak out against General Vang Pao. Both Paul Hilmer and Roger Warner approach complex situations in relevance to the timeframe and identifying possible explanations or justifications of how these controversies occurred. Rather than furthering their personal opinions about General Vang Pao, they present the argument and facts, allowing the reader to interpret the information. Jane Hamilton-Merritt spends virtually her entire book focusing on General Vang Pao and portrays his heroics as a narrative spectacle. All of these works are incredibly important in forming the legacy of General Vang Pao, and highly impacts the way in which history will remember him.

The perception of General Vang Pao varied over timeframes, stemming from the Vietnam War and Secret War in Laos up until the modern day. General Vang Pao originally was proclaimed as a defender against communism, and a key ally within Laos in American interests. During and after the war, his image has heavily damaged by Alfred McCoy and others pinning him a drug kingpin and a puppet for the CIA. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, General Vang Pao's legacy began to transform back into a recognized leader of the Hmong, who sought help Hmong refugees escape Laos and Thailand. He provided many organizations for assistance for the Hmong to assimilate to American culture, and dreamed of returning to his homeland in Laos. New scholarly books had been written to provide a narrative about his life and the struggles he had during and after the war.

After the events of 9/11, General Vang Pao's legacy began to decline due to being implicated on Neo Hom corrupt fundraising practices and heightened attention from Homeland Security about his ambitions to overthrow the government in Laos. Modern scholars and supporters of General Vang Pao contest these accusations in because other Hmong officials exploited his name to enrich themselves. Despite these modern developments, older generation Hmong and American politicians view General Vang Pao as a hero for his contributions to the U.S. forces in Vietnam and his role as a leader within the Hmong community.

Since General Vang Pao has passed, his legacy may ultimately be tarnished from scholarly writings and media coverage of events within his life. Time will tell in how human history will remember General Vang Pao. The memories could reflect the negative actions he committed in the hard times of war or being associated with crimes that other Hmong officials did through his name. Other memories could reflect the sheer bravery of a tribal leader who fought for his country and did everything he could to protect his people. It would be a real travesty if his legacy was compromised by individuals who are more interested in a historical debate of interpretation rather than seeking the truth. His death now allows spectators and observers to study this tremendous man's life and decide for themselves; other interpretations have already done enough damage.

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