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P. Michael Rattanasengchanh
mike12lax@gmail.com

Andrew Johns

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United States Secret War in Laos with the Hmong tribe (Vietnam era) – the agreement

P. Michael Rattanasengchahn
Family, Home and Social Sciences College at Brigham Young University
Mentor – Andrew Johns

Introduction

Purpose: The purpose of the project was to learn and understand the agreement between the Hmong tribe of Northern Laos and the United States when the U.S. government recruited the Hmong people to fight the communists in Laos.

Questions:
1. What did the United States promise the Hmong people for their involvement in the Vietnam War?
2. Did the United States promise the Hmong people their own land or country?
3. How did the Hmong interpret the outcome of the agreement with the United States government?
4. Are there any discrepancies from former research sources about the agreement between the Hmong and the United States government?

Procedure:
1. Research was conducted in Minneapolis, Minnesota (high concentration of Hmong immigrants)
2. Interviews:
   - President and Secretary of the Hmong Special Guerilla Units Veteran's organization
   - Several Hmong professors from local Minnesota universities
   - A Hmong Colonel in the former Royal Laotian Army
   - An enrollment and training officer for the former Royal Laotian Army
   - Interviews were translated from Lao to English and transcribed
3. Primary and secondary documents found at the Hmong Archives

Background

The War:
In 1960, an agreement was made between the U.S. government (through the Central Intelligence Agency) and the Hmong tribe.

Recruitment began with several hundred and by the end of the war there were over 30,000 Hmong soldiers.

The Hmong were scattered and lived in mountainous regions. As communist forces were gaining more territory thousands of Hmong women and children were forced to live in military encampments.

Unable to farm, the Hmong relied heavily on American air drops for food, clothing, and military supplies.

Aftermath of the war:
U.S. military forces pulled out of Southeast Asia in 1975.

Tens of thousands of Hmong were trapped in mountainous encampments.

All aid was cut off to the Hmong.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) affilated all top military leaders and politicians and their families.

Thousands of other Hmong traveled by foot across communist held territory and the Mekong River to Thailand.

Thousands died from starvation and military confrontations. Those who stayed in Laos were killed (if in the military), put into reeducation camps or fled deep into the jungle where they are still fighting to this day.

In more recent times, Thailand (where many of the Hmong have lived in refugee camps) and Laos signed an agreement which called for the return of the Hmong to Laos. Thousands of Hmong are scared of retribution.

Hypothesis

1. What did the United States promise the Hmong people for their involvement in the Vietnam War?
2. Did the United States promise the Hmong people their own land or country?
3. How did the Hmong interpret the outcome of the agreement with the United States government?
4. Are there any discrepancies from former research sources about the agreement between the Hmong and the United States government?

Results from Interviews and Archival research

Question: Why did the United States turn to the Hmong to fight in Laos during the Vietnam War?

Interviewees:
- Tao Pao Yang, (Former soldier and President of the Specialist Guerilla Units Veteran Organization, the unit was formed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency)
- Dr. Yang Dao, (Former cabinet member of the Provisional Government of Laos and professor at the Univ. of Minnesota)
- Xang Yang, (Former soldier and Secretary of Specialist Guerilla Units Veteran Office) 

"There was no contract signed but a verbal promise… American would provide military supply, weapons, whatever necessary for the Hmong people. If the Hmong people fight for the Americans, then we will help the Hmong people as much as we can. If the Hmong people lose, we will find a new place where we can help the Hmong people."

There was no contract signed but it was a verbal promise... American would provide military supply, weapons, whatever necessary for the Hmong people. If the Hmong people fight for the Americans, then we will help the Hmong people as much as we can. If the Hmong people lose, we will find a new place where we can help the Hmong people.

Question: What did the United States promise if the Hmong fought for them?

Scholars:
- Keith Quong, author of Harvesting the Hero's Wheat, "The Hmong & Americans Secret War in Laos, "U.S. CIA agent, Bill Lair (CIA agent heading the Hmong operation) pledged arms, supplies, money.
- Arthur C. Hummer, author of The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans, "Bill Lair pledged arms, supplies, and training if the [Hmong] made a good showing against the enemy and a new place to live if they were defeated.
- Jao Hamilton-Merritt, author of Thai Mountain, quoting Tao Yang (a Hmong clan leader), "If the Hmong people beat the Vietnamese, then we will help the Hmong people as much as we can. If the Hmong people lose, we will find a new place where we can help the Hmong people."

Interviewees (Hmong and U.S. military and political officials) and other primary sources:
- Dr. Yang Dao, (Former soldier and President of the Specialist Guerilla Units Veteran Organization) "They didn't promise "if you fight for me and we win you will have your own country, or if you lose the war we will bring you to America." "There was no promise." They promised guns and money.

William Sullivan, former Ambassador of Laos and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs: I do not believe we have any legal obligation nor do we have any commitments that require us as a nation to insist that the independence of Laos must be preserved, we have no commitment.

Colonel Yang Chao, (Colone in the former Royal Laotian Army) when asked if the U.S. promised the Hmong land he responded, "they are lying, they don't know anything. They don't have any agreement or promise. Everything that they gave to the Hmong people [were] Ammunition, guns and food."

Tao Pao Yang, when asked if the United States promised the Hmong a country of their own land he responded, "no, only to live and to eat, but to have a house, to have personal freedom"

Xang Yang, "There was no contract signed but [a] verbal promise... American would provide military supply, weapons, whatever necessary for the Hmong and Laotians to protect their country so that they can take control of the country at the time."

Xia Gi Laos, (Seven year old former soldier) "There was a verbal contract saying if the United States lost, they would bring whichever Hmong person who wanted to go to an exit for the Hmong family."

Bill Lair, "CIA Agent who headed the CIA operation with the Hmong people. "We didn't promise the (Hmong) anything, but we owed them something when we left."

Question: Did the United States keep its promises?

Interviewees:
- Colonel Yang Chao, (Colone in the former Royal Laotian Army) "We have nothing to rest the Viet people. America wanted to abandon and wash their hands and [give] back homes. So we have no brother, noodiac, no ammunition, no food, no support. If we stay we will die."

Stong Yang, (Graduate at Kentucky College in Minnesota) "But eventually the United States returned[ed] to the united states, they [Hmong] could no longer stay in Laos. If they stay they will be murdered by the Viets."

Tao Pao Yang, "They [Americans] broke their promise in that they left the soldiers and the Hmong in the jungles and mountains to die but afterwards when the Hmong reached Thailand the Americans helped."

This for Law Brate, (A former soldier and Secretary of the former Royal Laotian Army) "They [U.S.] just left. They didn't care who couldn't stay or leave. If they could leave then good but if they stayed and were killed they didn't care. The government in Vientiane and the king, they were killed, the Americans didn't say anything. They didn't care, they came and then left. It made us lose hope."

This for Law Brate, "Why? U.S. left and they will help the Hmong leave Laos, that is not correct. If they [Hmong] couldn't stay but make it to Thailand then they would be free. America would help."

Conclusion

1. From the interviews and primary and secondary sources found at the Hmong Archives, it can be concluded that there is an obvious discrepancy between the scholarship and the Hmong population and the U.S. and Hmong military and government officials. From past scholarship, the general Hmong population said that America promised them land. However, according to interviews conducted with Hmong military and political leaders and U.S. officials, the claim was invalid.
2. The U.S. did promise: food, military supplies and money.
3. Despite the discrepancies, many of the interviewees and scholars felt America had a moral obligation to help the Hmong.
4. America became the Hmong's broker. After the U.S. left Southeast Asia, the Hmong's only support and protection was gone. They were left to fight the communist Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops alone.

As a result, the Hmong have been in a state Diaspora. Thousands live in Australia, France, America and Thailand. Now many of the Hmong in Thailand have been deported back to Laos, a government that once was their enemy.