

ARRESTING VANG PAO:
NATIVISM, IMMIGRATION, AND FOREIGN POLICY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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By
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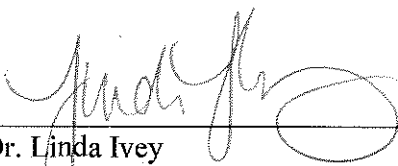
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Introduction

The arrest of Vang Pao was just a brief story I heard on the radio while I was driving, many years ago. At the time I was not yet a student in graduate school, working towards a Masters in History. I was a social studies teacher, thinking more about the constant dramas and stresses involved with running a classroom every day, full of adolescents and their helicopter parents, trying to instill more than just the knowledge of names, dates, and places that history class is infamous for doing.

As I drove along, the radio announced the ATF raid on Hmong homes all across California, part of a sting operation that revealed a plot to overthrow the Laotian government. Now my ears pricked up. I knew the Hmong only from Clint Eastwood's movie, *Gran Torino*, which followed the plight of a young boy trying to fit in and survive surrounded by gangs. His cratchtey neighbor, played by Eastwood, helped him to grow to be independent and fight for himself, a journey that transforms both the boy and Eastwood's character.

When the radio mentioned a coup, I was intrigued because revolution is always interesting to a social studies teacher, and one that had started in California was even more interesting because I was living in California at the time.

The report explained that a Laotian general had been arrested after meeting with undercover agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to negotiate the sale of military weapons. The guns, bombs and rockets involved in the sale were to be used to overthrow of the Laotian government. After meeting in a Thai restaurant in

Sacramento, the General and his co-conspirators had been accused of violating the Neutrality Act, which made it illegal to overthrow a government from within the United States. At the time I found it interesting, but not compelling. I remembered thinking, “Who does that? And who does that from Sacramento? Nothing happens in Sacramento.” And then I went back to thinking about the other, more important problems of my day, not to think again about this story for many, many years.

When I decided to return to graduate school for my second Master’s degree, my first having been for teaching, I took a class in the history of American immigration. The course introduced me to the histories of many groups who had come to the United States, seeking a better life for themselves and their future generations. The histories had many similarities; the push and pull factors of immigration, but also in the experiences that the groups inevitably had to walk through as they acclimated to a new life in the United States.

The arrest of General Vang Pao and the Hmong came back to me during that class; an example of immigration and assimilation. The experience of the Hmong was not unlike the Chinese, Japanese, Cuban and other immigrant groups. Each of these peoples had struggled to adjust to life inside the United States because of push and pull factors in their decision to relocate. Furthermore, the strong desire to return to Laos, seeking justice for long ago failures and suffering, seemed evidence that assimilation is never complete; that identity cannot be easily transformed merely because the person or persons have relocated geographically. Identity, citizenship, nationalism and violence were all present in the story of Vang Pao and the Hmong refugees. Their arrest in Sacramento seemed a

story needing to be told, as the immigration debate was becoming more politically hot, and this gave increased relevance to issues obvious within the arrest of Vang Pao.

An element of the story was the role Vang Pao played as a military leader. The Secret War in Laos from 1961-1972 is largely unrecognized in textbooks and social studies classes. In college, the Secret War may be mentioned but it is a footnote to the Vietnam War. The role that Vang Pao played in the foreign policy of the United States created an interesting contradiction. Here was a hero of the American crusade against communist control in Indochina. Vang Pao was by all accounts an amazing battlefield commander, whose Hmong fighters bravely and successfully fought for the American cause in Laos, against the North Vietnamese, and later against the communist Pathet Lao. Now, the U.S. government had arrested Vang Pao in a sting operation, accusing him of a crime by continuing to fight for the American cause in Laos. The conflict between the law, Vang Pao, and U.S. foreign policy was blatant and interesting. It created questions about the combination of foreign policy, the Cold War and immigration, leading to the arrest of someone who should be considered an American hero, and not just a footsoldier in the Cold War.

“Arresting Vang Pao” reveals how American foreign policy created a feedback loop of nativism at home and abroad, through immigration policy constructed in a reaction to foreign wars, based upon the promotion and defense of a national identity, defined through a nativist definition of citizenship.

The person known as Vang Pao was not of the majority Lao population, hailing from a small minority hill tribe known as Meo, or Hmong. This minority background

would make Vang Pao an important player in Laotian politics, as he represented a presumptive enlightened, western approach to modernization favored by the Laotian leadership. In essence, if a hill tribesman like Vang Pao could become an important asset to a major western superpower, then Laos had achieved a place of respect in the world, and could emerge from being a backward, minor province in Southeast Asia.

He was also a natural leader and guerilla fighter. His willingness to live for long periods in dark jungle terrain, inspiring his men to follow him there, made him an asset not only to Laos, but to the United States as well. The historian Roger Warner (who knew Pao personally and wrote of the Secret War in his historical narrative, *Backfire*) described the CIA reaction: “Vang Pao was the man they were looking for... They had never seen a people as ripe for partisan war as the Meo of Laos, or a leader as accomplished as Vang Pao. He was perfectly at home in his environment. With his upward tilting eyes in that keen, intelligent face, he reminded [CIA field agent Bill] Lair of a miniature Genghis Khan.”¹

This reference to Genghis Khan was a compliment, from the perspective of the Americans. They needed a fighter, and Vang Pao was extremely capable. The CIA set out to make effective use of Pao to fight the North Vietnamese, a traditional enemy of the Hmong, in a secret campaign that would not only help the Hmong, but also advance the interests of the United States in the region. Vang Pao was a hero created by the United States to counterbalance the growing popularity of Communist leader Ho Chi Minh in neighboring Vietnam.

The decline of the regional war in Indochina was obvious to the CIA handlers that

had raised an army around Vang Pao. The end was obvious and undeniable. The Americans had miscalculated in Laos. They were fighting a war that many of the CIA “in country” believed in initially, but now saw only the quagmire that Southeast Asia represents in history.

American failure in Vietnam soon revealed the fault in the policy in Indochina to be a result of nativist thinking about the region. The leadership that identified and empowered Vang Pao had sought a Genghis Khan to fight against the rising tide of Communism. This opposition to Communism was born out of the belief that it was antithetical to the American way of life, and a threat to national interests in Southeast Asia.

With the focus securely on American interests at the beginning, the war was founded upon a belief that the American way of life was naturally better for the people of Laos, despite their history, their post-colonial goals, and the needs of their people to modernize. The choice between Communism or American capitalist democracy was a debate that the Americans wanted to influence, and this nativist perspective included the judgement of war planners and the CIA in Laos from the beginning.

The irony of this was Vang Pao was not able to win the war he was enlisted to fight. Looking back now, the war in Vietnam was not winnable even from the start in 1954. The documentary records suggests that Vietnam was beyond the comprehension of the Americans who crusaded for American values in Southeast Asia. In retrospect it seems obvious that the conflict was always a civil war, fought for independence from colonial control.

Seen in this light, the American involvement was primarily about reasserting the colonial control over the region that France had established, and that the Japanese invasion had interrupted. Indeed, in the Pentagon Papers, this reality is clearly laid out, as the rationale for the war was always to control the rubber, oil and tin resources that Indochina possessed and which France and Japan needed to rebuild after World War Two.²

Vang Pao certainly could not have won this regional conflict, nor could he win the civil war inside Laos. He could not have known that he was setting his people up for failure. He believed in the American perspective; Communism was not compatible with the way of life of the Hmong. His judgement on this was untested, but his leadership was so strong, his people believed in his decision to side with the Americans, without hesitation or doubt. It was a terrible miscalculation. Arguably it was more terrible than the Americans' miscalculation, because while the United States paid dearly in lives and treasure for what happened in Vietnam, Vang Pao and the Hmong paid more dearly. The Hmong lost lives, treasure and their very homeland as a result of Vang Pao's decision to embrace the American cause in Laos. The sad existence of the Hmong who remain in country is one of persecuted minority, hiding from a Laotian government that seeks to jail, torture or kill any Hmong that are discovered. The Hmong are a refugee people, thanks in large part to the United States and the leadership of Vang Pao.

The Hmong people were forced to flee their homeland in Laos because of the failure of American understanding in Indochina. Leaving behind everything they knew and arriving in the United States, 3,000 Hmong were unassimilated and unaccustomed to

Western society. (The Hmong population would nevertheless grow over time to 180,000 living in the United States, and a worldwide diaspora of 4.5 million.³ Arriving from the dense jungles surrounding the Plain of Jars, the urban jungles of Portland, Oregon, and of Los Angeles and Fresno, California were strange and threatening by contrast. The generation of Hmong who followed Vang Pao to the United States had to endure enormous difficulties as they rebuilt their lives. They persevered through this experience, preserving as much of their traditional culture, language and tradition as possible, but losing more with each new generation that comes of age in the United States, unfamiliar with the culture whose defense prompted this diaspora in the first place.

In America, Vang Pao continued to lead the Hmong refugee population, becoming a symbol of Hmong nationalism, and benefiting financially from this illusion. As a former general, there was not much else Vang Pao could do except continue to lead the Hmong people. His skills on the battlefield did not translate well into a western capitalist industrialized economy, beyond being a leader. He had, at best, a third grade education. His role became one of community leader, a position that held diminishing importance over time, as the Hmong assimilated into their new lives in the United States.

In order to insure his seat at the head of the Hmong community, Vang Pao relied upon the memory of his past leadership. Vang needed to stoke the memory of the lost mission, and the plight of the Hmong who remained behind. The fantasy of returning to Laos, and saving the remaining Hmong, enticed Vang Pao to plot an overthrow of the Laotian government. This plot represented the importance of Vang Pao to the Hmong, regardless of its chances for success. It is difficult to determine who was more delusional

when it came to the plot to overthrow Laos: Vang Pao or the Federal agents who sold him on the idea, entrapping him into a criminal scheme. Both were living an imagined reality where they were the crusader for justice in a world needing to be remade to fit their perception of the best life.

The desire to finish the war he was not allowed to win lured Vang Pao in a scheme to buy weapons and deliver a “9-11” style attack on Laos. Surrounded by supporters who wanted to see their old hero rise once again and finish his quest, Vang Pao walked into a trap that was set for him by government agents. The irony was that Vang Pao was set up to take the fall for a criminal conspiracy by the same government that set him up to take a fall for the criminal conspiracy of the Secret War in Laos. Vang Pao was what Ludwig Von Mises described as “[t]hose confused and misguided sympathizers who call themselves "liberals" and whom the communists call "useful innocents," the fellow-travellers and even the majority of the officially registered party members, who would be terribly frightened if they were to discover one day that their chiefs mean business when preaching sedition. But then it may be too late to avert disaster.”⁴ Vang Pao and the Hmong were useful innocents; tools that enabled larger plans of conquest to be fought by the United States, whose lives could be sacrificed, regardless of the outcome. And they were, ultimately, sacrificed.

Agents from the ATF entrapped Vang Pao and others into attempting to buy military assault weapons for the attack, a violation of the U.S. Neutrality Act. The trap was sprung after a long series of meetings to set up the Hmong into buying weapons, and arranging for delivery inside Thailand. The ATF spent many months running Operation

Tarnished Eagle, a sting operation designed to prey upon the life's mission of Vang Pao, who needed to be a revolutionary leader and defender of the Hmong in order to assimilate from the battlefields of Laos into the Central Valley of California.

The following pages delve deeper into the story of Vang Pao, and what his story adds to our understanding of immigration, nativism, and the Cold War. Vang's story explores deeper into the transplanted culture and politics of refugees, and in the unique context of the war in Southeast Asia. In Chapter 1, *Operation Tarnished Eagle* reveals how the *Arrest of Vang Pao* represents the final stage of the cycle of nativism. The cycle promotes U.S. wars abroad but causes blowback at home; creating refugees and immigrant waves that disturb the American populace. The Cold War proxy battles defining the U.S. approach alienate entire ethnic groups devoted to a path of self determination that binds their success to the victory of the United States. In Laos, Vang Pao and the Hmong risked everything to be free and independent in the jungle highlands. While tragic and unsuccessful, this story is corroborated with a similar experience, albeit with an opposite outcome, in Indonesia. Almost simultaneous with the war in Laos, the U.S. was backing a coup in Indonesia that led to the slaughter of the entire Communist movement in that nation, a genocide of nearly two and a half million Indonesians under Sukarno and Suharto.⁵

In Chapter 2, *The Secret War*, the story of the Hmong and their fight in the Secret War in Laos from 1961-1972 lays out the confusion that trapped Vang Pao and the Hmong into a situation from which they could not escape. The CIA backed Royal Lao Army served to counter the growing influence and encroachment by the Vietnamese

Communists. This effort elevated Vang Pao from a minor officer to the leader of an effective fighting force of 30,000 Hmong fighters. Creating this new power center around Vang Pao highlighted the power imbalance within traditional Lao society, setting off a coup against the government, backed by the CIA. When it backfired, the country was slowly taken over by the Pathet Lao, a communist government opposed to Vang Pao and his American patrons.

The Secret War exposes how the Hmong were never meant to be equal members of the crusade for democracy in Southeast Asia, instead serving as a subordinate proxy only. When the war failed, the Hmong were discounted by their American sponsors. Unfortunately this segregated thinking denied the unity of the mission, leaving the Hmong as refugees seeking a new land. It was this segregated thinking that represents the nativism inherent in American foreign policy. The Hmong were to be helped, but never included as full partners with the Americans. They were associates, and never equals. This unequal assumption reflects the nativism that defines foreigners as different, lesser persons, not eligible for equal status in the United States.

The victory of the Pathet Lao spelled doom for the Hmong, who had made the terrible miscalculation of backing the American cause, and now had lost the very country they had sworn to defend. This ironic outcome is an example of the foreign policy of the United States, misreading the local political balance biased in favor of a nativist outlook, blurred by the Anglo-European ideal of democratic capitalism. What this meant for Vang Pao and the Hmong was that they now had to flee Laos for a new life in the United States.

In Chapter 3, *The Hmong Diaspora*, the ironic outcome of the Hmong story is revealed to be but one piece of a larger picture in the history of American immigration. The experience of the Hmong is not unlike the experience of other minority immigrant communities that arrived in the United States. Seeking a new start and new opportunity, they are confronted with domestic nativism and legal barriers to their acceptance and assimilation. The story begins with the Chinese experience in the late nineteenth century, building the Transcontinental Railroad and being confronted by nativist reactions to Chinese settlement in the United States.

In Chapter 4, *The Feedback Loop*, we see how the tradition of nativism at home, expressed through law and government surveillance, and expressed abroad through wars for Anglo-European democracy and capitalism, combine to create push and pull factors that perpetuate a 'cycle' of nativism. The desire for American identity, created through nativist laws and mistrust of non-white peoples, becomes the foreign policy of the United States, as seen in the wars going back to the middle of the nineteenth century. Each successive war is fought according to a similar nativist perspective, declaring defense of American values as the mission, which ultimately lead to new refugees and new restrictions on immigration and citizenship.

The story of Vang Pao and the Hmong is part of this cycle of violence abroad and discrimination at home. Each part of the cycle is born out in terms of American nativism and how America's foreign policy architects envision America's place in the world. This narrow, racial definition of American identity holds within it a fundamental flaw. The flaw is the belief that there can be only one true American identity, defined by Anglo-

European ancestry, culture, religion and economics. Identification of this flaw is the first stage in undoing the feedback loop of war and discrimination that has come to represent the United States in terms both foreign and domestic.

Once the feedback loop is identified and undone, perhaps the experience of future refugee groups can be freed from this cycle. Once free, an opportunity to avoid more stories like Vang Pao and the Hmong become possible. Until then, however, Vang Pao and the Hmong represent a symptom of a chronic tradition in American history.

Chapter One: Operation Tarnished Eagle

In the affidavit, he was “The Special Agent” employed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives with the United States Department of Justice. He had been employed by the ATF for the last seven years, assigned to the San Francisco Field Division. During his time with the Field Division he had conducted directly, or participated in, several investigations related to the possession and manufacture of firearms, as well as explosive devices. ⁶ His real name has been erased from the record as part of the security protocol surrounding undercover agents and the Federal government.

As an undercover operative, The Special Agent, was investigating Harrison Ulrich Jack. Jack was suspected of violating the law regarding the possession and transfer of machine guns, as well as conspiring to kill, kidnap, maim and injure persons or property in a foreign country -- a violation of the Neutrality Act. Harrison Jack had approached this agent through an old friend in the military, as Jack had served for decades in the United States Army.

Harrison Jack was a graduate of West Point, class of 1968, and served in the Army Infantry, and as an Army Ranger, and had completed Airborne School. He was on active duty with the Army until 1977, completing one tour of combat duty in Southeast Asia. He retired from active duty in 1977, serving as a Lieutenant Colonel in the National Guard, from which he was now also retired.⁷

Harrison Jack came to the attention of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) when he reached out to a defense contractor, inquiring about purchasing

500 AK-47s. The contractor became very concerned and went to the Phoenix office of the FBI to share his information regarding the proposed sale. When the FBI did not respond, the contractor went to the Phoenix ATF office, who referred it to the San Francisco branch.

The ATF in San Francisco referred it to the Sacramento branch, as Jack lived closest to that branch. The Special Agent then reached out to Jack, initiating a scheme to entrap Jack and the Hmong in a plot to violate the law. During a phone call in early 2007, made by The Special Agent to Jack, they discussed a meeting to initiate the purchase.⁸

The subsequent investigation focused around wiretaps on telephones used by Harrison Jack. According to affidavits sworn by the agents investigating Jack and the Hmong, the wiretaps would provide “the identification of other co-conspirators and aiders and abettors who are acting in concert... to unlawfully export listed munitions to Laos...”⁹ The affidavit explained that the wiretaps were needed to track the plot to gather the weapons, attack Laos and violate the Neutrality Act. The taps would reveal the when, where, how and by what means the attack would be financed, prepared and conducted.

The investigation focused on Harrison Jack, but included General Vang Pao and his family as well. Names listed in the affidavits sworn by the government investigators included May Song Vang, the general’s wife, Chong Vang, the general’s son, Youa True Vang, the founder of the Hmong International New Year, a website devoted to the American Hmong Community. Included in the investigation was also Lo Thao, President of the United Hmong International, a community service organization, and Hue Cang, a private investigator and a former Clovis, California police detective.¹⁰

General Vang Pao was an old soldier from the Cold War in Laos, but unlike other old soldiers, Vang Pao refused to fade away. He continued act as a leader in the Hmong community in the United States, in exile. Moreover, he continued to see himself as a military commander, carrying on the mission to defend Laos from Communist takeover. His life was frozen in the past, defined by a Cold War that ended nearly twenty-five years earlier, and a mission that failed over forty years earlier.

In a January 19, 2007 article in *The New Republic*, Vang Pao expressed his perspective on his leadership, and the continuing mission in Laos. The article, *Hmong Friends*, expressed frustration that the United States had not supported his cause. He commented, “The Hmong and me, myself, we were America’s best ally during the Vietnam War... The United States has better rifles, better guns than the Communists. If they give me the guns, I can conquer Laos in 2007. I still believe I can do it,”¹¹

The affidavits filed in the investigation of Vang Pao noted his perspective and the *New Republic* article: “According to the article, General Vang Pao believes he is the only person who can lead this revolution. In the same interview, he stated, “I don’t believe the younger generation would like to go back (to Laos)... There will be no one else like me... These younger leaders, they do for their own kind, their own group. But nationwide, I doubt it - no one like me.”¹²

The investigation had only been made possible by the connection of Harrison Jack. Without his personal involvement, there were few if any people with the ability to penetrate the Hmong community, at least in the minds of the investigators and The Special Agent. In the affidavit requesting continued wiretaps on the suspects in Operation

Tarnished Eagle, the agent wrote about the difficulty faced when gathering evidence from within the Hmong community.. “It has been my experience and that of other law enforcement officers that most individuals cooperating with law enforcement are unable to maintain the ability to provide useful or actionable information to fully realize or further the goals of an investigation such as this into an insular community with a military oriented agenda.”¹³

It was the trust the Hmong placed in Harrison Jack that allowed The Special Agent to manipulate Jack into becoming his informant. Again, in documents arguing for continued surveillance of the suspects in Operation Tarnished Eagle, agents wrote: “My experience has shown me that clan organizations, such as Neo Hom, compartmentalize their operations to senior leadership... Individuals within Neo Hom who have access to sensitive information and are privy to criminal activity have been vetted by years of experience and interaction, including actions dating back to the Vietnam War.”¹⁴ The government anticipated a closed Hmong society, built around the military training that the United States taught to the Hmong in the Secret War in Laos.

The Neo Hom has been identified by the government investigators as “persons who follow General Vang Pao and support the overthrow of the Laotian government by Hmong insurgents.”¹⁵ General Pao established the Neo Hom after his arrival from Laos, leading the Hmong refugees. The name Neo Hom is also known as the United Lao National Liberation Front. An English translation of “Neo Hom” is “The Way.”

During a public speech in 1987 at The Heritage Foundation in Washington D.C., General Vang Pao described the objectives of Neo Hom as, “to mobilize all Laotian

people, inside as well as outside of Laos, to overthrow the puppet regime imposed on the Laotian people by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.”¹⁶ Despite the warm welcome that Vang Pao received from the Heritage Foundation, his claims against the Laotian government fell short of arousing action in Washington, especially when he argued that the Pathet Lao were conducting a genocide against the people of Laos, including medical experimentation and sexual slavery “for the purpose of human reproduction with North Vietnamese men so that the new generation in Laos will be purely Vietnamese.”¹⁷

Here’s an interesting twist in examining the role of nativism in this particular story. This might be seen as nativist from the Neo Hom perspective. The view that their racial purity is endangered by the encroachment of North Vietnamese men, mating with Hmong women, is seemingly a perspective that sees Hmong racial purity as an important goal. The identity of the Hmong would therefore be connected to racial purity and Hmong nativism. In this way the perspective of racial purity and nativism among the Hmong would be similar to the racial perspective and nativism of the American nativist movement. It is perhaps coincidental that these similarities exist, but regardless of the coincidence it remains a curious consistency between the American and Hmong nativist traditions.

A Tradition of Militant Secrecy

The American Hmong community maintained a tradition of military hierarchy; a leftover from the Secret War in Laos. Combined with the traditional Hmong tradition of elder respect, the militancy that Vang Pao and his followers in the Neo Hom practiced

gave the feeling of a closed society, separate from and assimilated into American life.

During a previous investigation of the Hmong community, the FBI reported that “individuals with knowledge of Neo Hom were often unwilling to provide it for fear of retaliation against themselves and their families. Some individuals made false statements; others pretended not to have the information. One individual acknowledged that he had relevant information but refused to provide it for fear of the consequences.”

The behavior reported by multiple government investigations suggests not only that the government had long held suspicions regarding the Hmong in America, but that the Hmong had long suspected the United States government of being a hostile force out to get the Hmong. In documents sworn out by agents conducting the investigation against the Neo Hom the difficulty of gaining testimony was considered an obstacle that required electronic surveillance to surmount. “The issuance of grand jury subpoenas will be ineffective because witnesses may invoke the Fifth Amendment right to remain silent.”¹⁸

The irony of this observation by the government agent investigating the Hmong and Harrison Jack is informative. It reveals the influence of the United States foreign policy on the refugee culture of the Hmong in the United States. The creation of the Neo Hom, their militancy, their tactics and their structure of operations are all traditions and tangents left over from the United States effort to radicalize and use the Hmong as a force of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia thirty-five years earlier. It represents how American overseas wars created refugee groups, leading to terrorism and failed efforts at assimilation of those refugee groups into American life. In fact, after September 11, 2001, the Patriot Act classified the Neo Hom as a terrorist group. This classification was

later reversed, as it implied that the United States was sponsoring terrorist acts against the Laotian government by supporting the Hmong.¹⁹

In this case, the investigation into the Neo Hom, Harrison Jack and General Vang Pao required wiretaps on telephones and the building of trust with Jack and representatives of the Neo Hom over time. Agents from the ATF wrote in their affidavits, “In order to prove that the conspirators intend to violate the Neutrality Act by beginning, providing, preparing, money for and taking part in a military expedition or enterprise to be carried out against the foreign state and people of Laos... we need to know what the conspirators are saying to each other, not only what Jack is passing on...”²⁰

On February 7, 2007 the Secret Agent met with Harrison Jack, General Vang Pao and twelve other Neo Hom leaders. They sat down together for lunch at the Amarin Thai Restaurant in Sacramento, California. In previous calls, Jack and The Special Agent had arranged for a show of weapons samples available for purchase.²¹ A manilla envelope, containing the weapons list, ammunition and other support items were listed, along with the proposed prices. During the lunch, Jack and General Pao explained their plan to “initiate hostile military action in the very near future against the government of Laos... and attempt to gain control of certain areas of the border between Laos and Thailand.” The Special Agent, in addition to providing the weapons, was asked to provide two dozen special operations mercenary troops, to play a large role in the operation.²²

After the lunch, The Special Agent walked General Pao, Harrison Jack and the other twelve Neo Hom to an RV parked nearby the restaurant. Together, and under video surveillance, General Pao, Jack and the others examined the following firearms and

explosives they believed were for sale:

1. MP5k PDW, a 9mm submachine gun.
2. MP58D, a silenced submachine gun.
3. Colt M1A1 with M203 attachment, a submachine gun with an attached 40 mm grenade launcher.
4. M16A2, a 5.16mm machine gun.
5. M-14, a 7.62 submachine gun.
6. Polish AKM, a 7.62 mm AK-type submachine gun.
7. PKM, a 7.62 belt fired submachine gun.
8. M79, a 40 mm grenade launcher.
9. RPG7B, a rocket propelled grenade launcher.
10. Inert M67 fragmentation grenade, a baseball-type hand grenade.
11. Inert M72A2 LAW, a rocket propelled anti-tank weapon.
12. Inert M18 Claymore mine, an anti personnel mine.
13. Inert M112 Comp, C-4, commonly referred to as “plastic explosives”.²³

The conversations in the RV were recorded by The Special Agent on video.

General Vang Pao viewed the weapons and commented on the AK-47s. He said that The Special Agent had very good quality weapons, and that he was “sold on the whole thing.” Jack and Hue Vang then gave The Special Agent maps, indicating where the weapons would be delivered in Thailand and on the border of Laos, by air drop.²⁴ The meeting ended with a general agreement among all parties to move forward with the plans to procure the weapons.

On March 5, Jack met with The Special Agent at the Hangar 17 Bar and Grill, in Sacramento, California. At this meeting Jack described how he had contacted a California Highway Patrol (CHP) Commissioner, hoping to recruit officers of Hmong heritage and

ethnicity as sworn law enforcement officers in the CHP. Jack explained that Hmong with CHP training offered a “residual” benefit, because they would be able to use these men as internal security, operations and road control immediately after the planned coup. Jack gave The Special Agent the impression that the Neo Hom’s intention was to find as many men loyal to the Neo Hom and General Pao as possible, encourage them to abandon the CHP and move to Laos to take positions of trust in the new Lao government, established under the leadership of General Vang Pao.²⁵

On April 3, 2007 The Special Agent called Jack at home. Jack explained to him that Hmong community leaders had recently met with a CIA Deputy Director. During the meeting, the Deputy Director pledged support in the form of intelligence and funding for a military operation inside Laos.²⁶

On April 12, 2007, Lo Cha Thao called Harrison Jack on a line recorded by The Special Agent. Lo Cha Thao was one of the leaders of the Hmong community in America, and a known member of the Neo Hom group. Thao helped the Neo Hom organization to raise funds from among the American Hmong community. These funds were often used to support Vang Pao, and to promote awareness of the Hmong community. During that call Lo Cha Thao told Jack that he had participated in a conference call with an unnamed United States Congressman about what Thao described as “on the table politics.” Thao said that his group had been consulting with an unnamed United States Congressman and had received advice concerning “under table strategies” from military personnel like Harrison Jack and an unnamed “CIA guy.”²⁷

This cooperation between the Hmong and the Federal government intelligence

services is curious. The addition of this information in the wiretaps implies that it was meant to be kept secret. That may imply that it is credible to believe that the Federal government was aiding the American Hmong in their efforts to overthrow the Laotian state.

If true, it would add to the argument that the federal government acts to express nativist ideals overseas which lead to negative outcomes for refugee and immigrant groups in the nation. The Hmong were led to believe that their cause was just and supported by their former allies in the government, only to find that agents within that same government were investigating and plotting against them simultaneously.

The Special Delivery

On April 24, 2007, The Special Agent returned a call from Harrison Jack. During that call the final weapons order was discussed along with the final amount to be paid for the weapons. The Special Agent advised Jack that the total amount of the purchase was to be \$9.8 million dollars.²⁸ This discussion, recorded over a wiretap, reveals the motivation for Harrison Jack to help the Hmong to overthrow the government of Laos. He said on that call, "I'll tell you, I'll tell you what are...what my thoughts are. Um, you know, the, the, the percentages that, well put it this way... it's taken me ten years to put this together. It's not just the last couple of months.... I set it up. Now you close it."²⁹ Jack here revealed his efforts to aid the Hmong with their overthrow plans was based upon self interest, in addition to altruistic beliefs about the plight of the Hmong in America.

On April 29, 2007, Harrison Jack telephoned The Special Agent and left a

message. Jack said that he was following up on his previous call to ask about the ability of The Special Agent to deliver weapons to a specific location.

Jack was working under the false assumption that The Special Agent was a weapons dealer, with a military background and extensive contacts in special forces operations in Southeast Asia, just the sort of person who would be suited to deliver a large amount of military weaponry to a remote jungle location, but with great discretion and low visibility.

The location was the border of Thailand and Laos. Jack had arranged with The Special Agent to purchase a large amount of automatic weapons, plastic explosives and ammunition, and had arranged financing through the Hmong leadership. The money would incriminate not only Jack, but the Hmong who fronted the money as well.

On May 3, 2007, The Special Agent met with Harrison Jack. Previously, on April 24, 2007, The Special Agent had a meeting with a representative of the Hmong Community leadership, Lo Cha Thao, of the paramilitary Neo Hmong group.

At the April 24th meeting the weapons list for the sale was determined. The meeting on May 4, 2007 was for Harrison Jack to finalize the bill of sale and arrange for delivery and payment.

They met inside a the Hangar 17 Bar and Grill in Sacramento, California. No one at the meeting knew that The Special Agent was anything but a mercenary that Harrison Jack had contacted. No one knew they were trapped in a sting operation, code named Operation Tarnished Eagle.

Jack told The Special Agent “that he thought a well trained team of special

operations-trained mercenaries could secure Vientiane (the capital of Laos) in order to disrupt Laotian government operations.”³⁰ Then Jack pulled out his cell phone and handed it to The Special Agent. On the phone was Lo Cha Thao, the Hmong money man.

Thao explained that “he was waiting for intelligence from Thailand regarding the drop locations and that they were also in the process of interviewing and selecting prospective leaders who could mobilize people in Laos to carry out their plans.”³¹ The phone call ended with an agreement to speak again when details on where the weapons would be delivered in Thailand.

The weapons list consisted of AK-47s, AT-4 rockets, a stinger missile and an M-14 rifle. Harrison Jack looked at the weapons, displayed inside an RV in the parking lot of the Hangar 17 Bar and Grill. The transportation of the weapons was discussed, and it was agreed that The Special Agent would use his contacts in Thailand to transport a larger number of the weapons inside of Laos, where the Hmong would collect them. There was some debate about whether the weapons should be air dropped or driven across the border.

On May 4, 2007, Harrison Jack called The Special Agent to discuss transportation of the weapons into Laos. The Special Agent recommended using the Special Air Service (SAS), as they were in country already and were able to handle this mission, if the money was right.³² Harrison Jack told The Special Agent that “the Agency” was standing by and was ready to assist.

To The Special Agent, this meant that the CIA was participating in this effort to overthrow the government of Laos. He wrote in his affidavit, “I understood this

statement to mean that the CIA was preparing to assist the Hmong insurgency once the takeover of Laos had begun.”³³

If the CIA were involved it would bolster the existence of a feedback loop. Here is a suggestion that the U.S. government was assisting in an attack on a foreign state, using refugees created by an earlier failed insurgency, only to have agents from another branch of that government intercept the plot and arrest the refugees.

As it was in Laos from 1962-1972, one hand of the American government did not know what the other hand of the American government was doing. In both instances, Vang Pao and the Hmong paid dearly.

The money was again discussed. The Special Agent told Jack that his costs were all “up front” and that he would accept a “one-hundred to one-hundred-fifty thousand dollar order.” Jack responded that the Hmong were ready to “come to the table with cash in hand.”³⁴ The Special Agent said that he would also accept ten thousand dollars as a reservation for each stinger missile, “as long as the the first order was a minimum of one hundred thousand dollars.”³⁵ Harrison Jack replied, “Fifty thousand next week.”³⁶

Jack went on to describe the Hmong insurgency. The plan was to secure the capital, Vientiane, and Long Chang, which Jack described as a former CIA base.

In fact, the base at Long Chang was where the Secret War was centered. It was the main launching position for the guerrilla fighters and the Hmong air squadrons that fought with great success against the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao Communists.

It was nothing but a small landing strip on top of some hills in the middle of a thick jungle. To Vang Pao and the Hmong, however, it was a symbolic cultural and

political centerpiece. It was where they had risen up and had fallen from when Vang Pao led the Hmong out of Laos in defeat.

Jack described the Long Chang area to The Special Agent, and “suggested that it was a tactically advantageous area that would be easily defensible. Jack suggested that it could be used as a special operations base.” He then asked for the opinion of The Special Agent.³⁷

The irony is obvious. The same base of operation from which Vang Pao and the Hmong used in the Secret War from 1962-1972, Long Chang, was selected once again as a base of operations for the plot in 2007. The intended outcome in each case was the opposite of the actual outcome in each case. Unfortunately for Vang Pao and the Hmong the opposite outcome was the failure of their dreams for an independent Hmong homeland.

With the weapons list ordered, The Special Agent and Harrison Jack agreed to meet again, the next time with the money men of the Hmong community. On May 9, 2007 Harrison Jack telephoned Lo Cha Thao on a telephone that The Special Agent had wiretapped. During that taped telephone call, Jack told Thao that the payment for the weapons, the money exchange, needed to “be conducted in a place that is open and visible.” This suggested to The Special Agent that there existed some suspicion about him, questioning the safety of dealing with him.

At one meeting, Jack and The Special Agent discussed this growing suspicion. Jack said “the Hmong people were questioning him regarding [The Special Agent’s] identity and [his] ability to deliver the weapons.

Jack explained that this the concern arose because the Hmong have recently been identified as a terrorist organization. Jack said that according to Lo [Cha Thao], the Hmong are being designated as terrorist related people according to some type of new legislation and that they (Neo Hom) were getting nervous now that an exchange of money was near.”³⁸

The Senator

The suspicion of the Hmong leadership about The Special Agent appears to have come from a political source of some merit. In a telephone call on May 9, 2007, on a telephone recorded by The Special Agent, a conversation between Lo Cha Thao and Harrison Jack reveals the level of suspicion and the source of the information. The wiretap transcript reads as follows: “Lo Cha Thao told Jack that during his meeting with the person of England, his boss (whom he referred to as “the Senator”) was there. Lo Cha Thao told Jack that they told him not to do the deal in the United States... Lo Cha Thao said “the Senator” told him he knew about these sting operations and that they will make you feel comfortable but in the end they will get you. The Senator told him (Lo Cha Thao) that funds could not be exchanged inside the United States.”³⁹ The investigation and the suspects were all in upheaval. The suspicion was possible evidence of *mens rea*⁴⁰, the legal standard for malice. The Hmong and their accomplices sensed that their actions would be considered illegal if discovered, and attempted to hide it and were suspicious of agents looking for their plots and plans.

Harrison Jack and Lo Cha Thao discussed ways to test the ability and the

trustworthiness of The Special Agent. They planned to ask The Special Agent to accept payment overseas.⁴¹ According to the “The Senator”, if the payment happened overseas, Lo Cha Thao could not be arrested. Once again, the wiretap transcript reveals the telephone conversation between Lo and Jack: “The Senator sat on the judiciary committee and told him that five years ago the FBI used their own agents to sting the top FBI agent and that he (Lo Cha Thao) is nothing more than the FBI guy.”⁴² While the legal interpretation is interesting, it is more significant to note that the Hmong leadership were being advised by a Senator who sits on the Senate Judiciary Committee. The connection of a radical paramilitary group to a powerful United States Senator makes this case take on a greater significance beyond just a violation of the Neutrality Act. It presents a possible question about the legal connection between a Senator and a conspiracy to violate the law. The Senator even expressed detailed knowledge of the conspiracy to purchase and deliver the military weapons to Thailand, making the Senator an active plotter in the effort. Agents in the ATF wrote in their analysis of this conversation that, “La Cha Thao said that according to the senator, as long as no money exchange has occurred, no laws have been broken.”⁴³

The participation of an official of high position in the government is evidence of the feedback loop. This encouragement and assistance by a powerful American ally would encourage the Hmong to go forward with their efforts to overthrow Laos and achieve their forty year mission to return home in victory and defeat communism.

The temptation could not have been stronger for Vang Pao and his American Hmong. This support for an overseas expression of American values, albeit a fantasy,

represents the continuation of the same nativist ideology that sponsored the Secret War in Laos in the 1960's. Then, as now, the Hmong were being misled by the United States, to act as an instrument of American ideology, only to be betrayed by the United States again.

Just as in the failed war in Southeast Asia, the United States was again telling the Hmong one thing and then acting in a way contrary to the stated goals that the Hmong were led to believe. Again, the Hmong were being played for fools, this time by the ATF. In The Secret War in Laos, it was the war planners in Washington D.C. who had led the Hmong on a fool's errand. In Sacramento in 2007 it was the ATF who had led Vang Pao and the American Hmong into a trap. Both times the CIA was standing ready to support the Hmong. Time and time again the United States was acting at cross purposes. On May 9, 2007, Jack called The Special Agent and explained that he “wanted to complete the shipment payment in Mexico, Thailand or offshore in international waters.”⁴⁴ Because of the wiretaps on Jack's phone, The Special Agent knew of the suspicion within the Hmong leadership. In order to satisfy their suspicions, The Special Agent told Jack that he would accept payment outside of U.S. and that Thailand would be a good location.⁴⁵

“Lo Cha Thao then asked Jack if I told him what was being delivered, and Jack replied that it is one hundred and ten items (referring to AK-47 machine guns), twenty thousand rounds, four cases of smoke, red, green and a concentrate and ten cleaning kits including oil, patches and everything to maintain them.”⁴⁶

The total order included an additional ten Kinkov-style rifles, bringing the grand total of weapons to one hundred and twenty five.⁴⁷ The Special Agent discussed with Jack a second shipment of arms, including advanced Stinger missiles.

These discussions frequently involved short telephone calls from Jack to The Special Agent, then from Jack to Lo Cha Thao, and finally again from Jack to The Special Agent. There seems to have been no direct communication between Lo Cha Thao and The Special Agent, as Jack served as an intermediary. Ironically, The Special Agent had a wiretap on Jack's phone, so every conversation Jack made was known to The Special Agent, despite Jack's efforts to act as a go-between.

The plan seemed to be coming together, something that Harrison Jack and the Hmong appeared to welcome with great relief and excitement. They had already made arrangements for a second shipment of weapons. Jack asked Lo Cha Thao if upon delivery of the first shipment there would be a second payment to complete the first shipment and immediate payment for the next order. According to Jack, Lo Cha Thao told him that the (Neo Hom) have a minimum of "150" in hand right now for the first order. (Suggesting that \$100,000 was for full payment of the first order and \$50,000 was to be used for partial payment on the second order.)⁴⁸

The shipment represented the final link in a chain of contacts that were in place to launch an attack upon Laos and to topple the government. There was even more caution after it appeared that the weapons were about to be delivered to the Hmong contacts in Thailand. The Special Agent wrote in his affidavit, "Jack told me Lo Cha Thao believes the Thai forces are aware of Hmong efforts to organize, and Jack feels that things will

move very quickly. Jack told me that they (Neo Hom) are moving money and they have their own network for getting in and out (of Laos). Jack told me that I represent their best resource for this initiative that they've been trying to get started for 35 years."⁴⁹ The plan to reignite the Secret War was finally coming together after so many years. It is as if the Hmong and their American allies had never stopped fighting, but merely paused their campaign against the Laotian Pathet Lao because of a lack of resources. Now that they had resources and suppliers of the means of war, they were ready to go back to their lost war for independence.

Trapped in a Lost Cause

The Hmong were still trapped in a cause that had been lost in 1972, when the United States ended its Secret War in Laos. After the decision came to pull out, the United States had helped some of their Hmong army, the Royal Laos Army as it was officially titled, to escape the encroaching Pathet Lao, a communist group that ultimately took over Laos and continues to rule it in 2019.

The effort to save the Hmong who remained behind was a continuing obsession for the Hmong Leadership, especially for General Vang Pao. The effort to obtain military weaponry and save the Hmong who remained behind had led the American based Hmong community on a 35 year journey through the wilderness, eventually arriving at the meeting with The Special Agent and Operation Tarnished Eagle.

Operation Tarnished Eagle was named after the conspiracy by a once decorated and respected military veteran who had diminished his legacy by engaging in what the

government believed was a violation of the Neutrality Act, attempting to overthrow the Laotian government from within the United States. General Vang Pao was the “eagle”, and his group’s effort to procure military weaponry was a blemish, or tarnishment, of his respected legacy.

Now, in 2007, the mission was about to take a dramatic turn. The paramilitary arm of General Pao’s Hmong diaspora, the Neo Hom, were ready to launch an overthrow of Laos, returning General Pao to Laos, and placing him at the head of its government.⁵⁰ General Pao had never shed his role as the leader of the Hmong, and maintained a place of significance and leadership within the community after relocating to the United States. During his time as leader of the American Hmong community, General Pao used the memory of his leadership in Laos to demand monetary support from the refugees and their families, maintaining himself in a comfortable lifestyle, and never assimilating to his new country, the United States.

This represents a life trapped in the past. In another sense it represents a people trapped in an imagined past. Since the end of the Secret War in Laos, the Hmong people have been living as a community focused on completing a mission for a war that is long ended. They cannot be free from this focus, always working toward a day when they can return to Laos and the country they love. When interviewed about General Pao, a leader of the Hmong community in Fresno California, Lar Yang, expressed a devotion to refugee return to Laos that was widespread: “More than half of the Hmong population expected to go back. The death of Vang Pao ended that.”⁵¹

General Pao, as an instrument of the United States war in Indochina, became

trapped by the Cold War foreign policy of the United States. He was then a man without a nation, living the rest of his life as if still fighting a war that had, in reality, ended decades before. General Pao was trapped in time and space, not assimilating to the United States, but living as if he were still leading a rebel force in exile, waiting for his moment to return in victory to Laos. According to Lar Yang, “Vang Pao carried the burden of his people for three generations; as a deity in America, being the promise they would return one day and a the symbol of Hmong independence.”⁵²

The mission to return was the paramount focus of the Hmong community in a larger, unifying aspect. Vang Pao had used the memory of the lost Secret War as a way to raise funds for his continued leadership and his lifestyle. According to the affidavit sworn by The Special Agent, a letter was discovered describing how Vang Pao raised money from within the Hmong community to carry on his war for Hmong independence, despite it having ended more than three decades prior. The letter was written on Neo Hom letterhead, signed by General Pao, and “requests a \$1,000 donation from “each Committeeman” to “augment forces at the front, strengthening them to maneuver and destroy the enemy in each of our sectors.”⁵³

The money may have been used to continue the fight, as the military terminology leads a reader to believe. It is also quite possible that Vang Pao was using his position of leadership in the Hmong community to syphon financial support for himself, defrauding his own people and manipulating them with a memory of the past from which they could not escape and still consider themselves loyal to their community and their cause. With the passing of Vang Pao in 2011, the mission and unity of the Hmong community entered

a new phase, where the Cold War might not continue to trap and connect the refugees to a common purpose and identity. The Hmong in America were free at last to assimilate, unfettered by a failed past.

Before that passing, however, the mission remained the community identity. According to the affidavit sworn out by The Special Agent, on May 11, 2007, Lo Chao Thao and Harrison Jack met him at the Hangar 17 Bar and Grill at 1630 S Street in Sacramento, California. Lo Cha Thao told The Special Agent that the Neo Hom were trying very hard to make sure everything was in place, to facilitate delivery as they had planned. The Neo Hom had already dispatched nine or ten people, each carrying “ten each”, which The Special Agent believed meant that they were each carrying \$10,000, in order to avoid being questioned. The cash was to be used to pay The Special Agent in Thailand, avoiding any illegal activity by not exchanging cash payments on U.S. soil. The three men agreed to meet in Bangkok, Thailand prior to the weapons being delivered, and exchange the payment then.⁵⁴

This is how the conspiracy would have been illegal. The plotting of this crime, regardless of when the payment exchanged hands, was still illegal under U.S. law. The efforts by the Neo Hom, Lo Cha Thao and Harrison Jack to avoid breaking the law by intentionally exchanging money overseas was still illegal, and added evidence that they were working in coordination with a United States Senator to circumvent the law as part of the conspiracy.

Operation Tarnished Eagle and the Bay of Pigs

It was at this May 11, 2007 meeting that the details of the attack on Laos were revealed. Jack asked Lo Cha Thao if the Hmong Insurgents were at rallying points right inside Laos. Lo Cha Thao confirmed they were already in place. Jack also the Special Agent that he had spoken to one of their Neo Hom strategic planners and was told they had five thousand men in downtown Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Lo Cha Thao needed some men to do a “quick set up” in Vientiane and said that any disaster would send the Laotian government out of the country.⁵⁵ This apparently meant that he was ready for the special operations forces to move in and set the plan into motion. Once the violence started, Lo Cha Thao was ready to take advantage of the chaos and assert control over the country.

This was evidence of significant organizing on the part of the American based Neo Hom, and the Laotian based arm of the organization. The size, scale, course and consequence of the attack had been investigated, estimate and prepared. All that was missing was the weapons that Lo Cha Thao and Harrison Jack were about to supply to the Neo hom. That, and of course, General Pao to act as the symbolic leader of the coup.

The plan had an amazing amount of thought and detail already in place. Jack asked Lo Cha Thao if his plan was to create diversion and just “slide in.” Lo Cha Thao replied, that it was, and also said that the Neo Hom coup leader would then present the new democracy plan. Lo Cha Thao said that they have everything but the “equipment.” Lo Cha Thao asserted that on the ground as much as eighty percent of the people

supported democracy. He never offered any reason or evidence of this belief, however.⁵⁶

To any student of history, the plot to overthrow Laos, as described by Lo Cha Thao, sounds reminiscent of the CIA's own plan to overthrow the communist government of Fidel Castro with the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1960. In another way, these two plots have a similar mental obsession. The Cuban Americans, trained by the CIA to invade Cuba, believed as Lo Cha Thao assumed. Both the Hmong and the Cuban Americans felt that their invasion would be met by popular support from the people. The CIA was tragically wrong about the Cuban people in 1960, and it is possible that the Hmong were wrong to assume that the people still living in Laos would greet them as liberators. In the former plot we can see the error of assumption. In the latter plot we can not know if there was a similar error.

As both coup attempts were born out of the Cold War, it is interesting to note the common assumptions and obsessions. In Cuba, the rebels felt that they were restoring democracy by participating in an armed overthrow; an undemocratic coup. The Cuba insurgents believed that after they replaced the dictatorship in Cuba, that democracy would flower and peace would reign. There is not evidence that this was guaranteed, of course. Cuba has had a much longer tradition of undemocratic rule than it ever had under democracy. Indeed, the tradition in Cuba would lead to an expectation that democracy would not naturally sprout from the absence of dictatorship. If history is any guide, it may be expected that the removal of one dictator will only be replaced by another. The Neo Hom plot to overthrow Laos in 2007 has all of the similar assumptions and errors of expectation.

The details of the overthrow were discussed at that same May 11, 2007 meeting. According to the affidavit sworn by The Special Agent, “Lo Cha Thao told me that he wanted seven or eight key government buildings blown up at the same time. I asked him how much damage he wanted done to the buildings, and he relied “like September 11th” (referring to the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.) I told Lo Cha Thao that it was going to take a lot of explosives and asked him if he wanted the buildings to be empty or full (meaning full of people). He replied that his people have been trying to overthrow the communist government for thirty-five years and they need the buildings to be brought down.”⁵⁷ Lo Cha Thao and the Neo Hom were expressing a willingness to kill large numbers of innocent people in their effort to continue the Cold War struggle in Laos, a war that they were enlisted to fight by the United States. Ironically, in 2007, it was the United States, through agents of the ATF, that was entrapping the Neo Hom, and not enlisting their support.

Jack asked Lo Cha Thao if the buildings should be left standing so that they could be repaired after the take over by the Neo Hom. According to the affidavit, Lo Cha Thao responded, “No.” Lo said that if the buildings were destroyed, the people would realize that the communists were no longer in control. Lo said that if there was destruction of the important government buildings, then the ruling class of Laos all would get on an airplane and fly out to Vietnam.⁵⁸

This expectation seems to be unfounded, lacking evidence of the tenacity of the Laotian ruling class. It seems fanciful to expect that the leadership class, as a whole, would abandon the country after a 9-11 style assault on eight buildings in the capital. In

fact is the same fanciful assumption that led to the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the expectation that american soldiers would be greeted as liberators when the U.S. invaded in 2003.⁵⁹

The affidavit sworn by The Special Agent explains how the investigation was now completed, and that preparations for arrests were being made. “Lo Cha Thao now has insisted that the meeting for the initial advance payment of \$50,000 take place in Bangkok rather than Sacramento.... We are not going to make any actual delivery of arms and munitions to Jack, Lo Cha Thao, General Vang Pao or any of their associates. We are also not going to travel to Bangkok to take delivery of \$50,000 advance payment. We plan to arrest Jack, Lo Cha Thao, General Vang Pao and approximately 12 other co-conspirators before they leave the United States to travel to Bangkok. We intercepted a call from Lo Cha Thao in which he said that he was flying to Bangkok on Tuesday, June 5th. As a result of Lo’s travel schedule, we have scheduled all of the arrests for the morning of Monday, June 4.”⁶⁰

The arrests went down all across California on Monday, June 4, 2007, just as planned. The General and the Hmong leadership were arrested and taken into custody. The charges were brought against the coup plotters. Surprisingly, the charges against the coup plotters were later dropped.

Discovery and Dismissal

Attorneys for Harrison Jack, General Vang Pao, Lo Cha Thao and eight other defendants in the case filed an order for discovery with the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California on May 9, 2009. In it they requested documents evidencing the government's covert efforts toward Laos from 1961 through 2007. The attorneys for Vang Pao and Harrison Jack asserted that these documents would reveal that the United States was not "at peace" with Laos, a foundational burden in order to prove the violation of the Neutrality Act. In essence, the defense argued that Vang Pao and the Neo Hom would not have undertaken to overthrow the government of Laos without the direct assistance of the intelligence agencies of the United States, and that evidence of this would prove that the government itself was not "at peace" with Laos, therefore Vang Pao and the Neo Hom could not have violated the Neutrality Act.⁶¹

The Court agreed, in part, with the defense arguments that evidence of the government's covert actions against Laos since 2006 would be material to the case. The Court limited the discovery to include only the evidence of the covert actions of the United States against Laos since 2006, as that was when the government alleged the plot by Vang Pao and the Hmong began. The Court stated, "...even though we may be "at war" with another nation, we are "at peace" with them until it is exposed that we are in fact engaged in military activities against them, at which point we are no longer "at peace."⁶²

In essence, the Court found that while Vang Pao may be prosecuted for violating

the Neutrality Act and imprisoned if the U.S. was engaged in a covert war, once the covert activities became public, the charge of violating the Neutrality Act would no longer apply. This might suggest that the Court has found that the actions of the government are above the law, unless revealed to the public. Soon after this ruling by the Court, the charges against Vang Pao and the other co-defendants were dropped.

The Federal prosecutor used an obscure section of the federal code that allowed all charges to be dropped if it would spare the Federal government any embarrassment from the trial to go forward. The embarrassment in this case would be the renewal in the minds of Americans that their government had once destroyed Southeast Asia, and that the refugees from that crisis were still present in the nation in 2007. The embarrassment would have been in a discovery of the CIA support for the new coup. The embarrassment would have been in the discovery of the intervention by high officials supporting the Hmong efforts to overthrow a government that had never attacked the United States.

The outrage in the Hmong community may have added to the influence that led to the charges being dropped. The men charged with violating the Neutrality Acts were all prominent members of the Hmong community in the United States, and their powerful allies in Washington D. C. certainly weighed in on the decision to go forward.

It also would seem important to note that the press coverage was an unwanted development. The story of Vang Pao and his service in Laos played in the media like a hero being unjustly charged. This would be accurate and proper to report, of course, as Vang Pao was a victim. He was a victim of the United States once again, and for the same misguided mission. Reports of his arrest brought back to the surface the ill feelings

about the Vietnam War and the illegality of the Secret War in Laos. In order to avoid more dirty laundry being aired in public, the decision was made to end the spectacle and drop the charges.

Regardless of the salacious revelations that might have come from this arrest, the fact of the investigation and arrest represent the tail end of the feedback loop of American nativism. The initial efforts to express American ideology abroad created the refugees from the violence inherent in the expression. Those refugee communities would fuel nativist reactions in the United States, which moved to pass immigration restrictions against the same refugee populations that were created by the initial foreign crusade.

The Feedback Loop of Nativism

Nativism abroad fueled nativism at home, both then and now. The arrest of Vang Pao is the manifestation of the feedback loop of nativism, defining American citizenship and ideology in terms of a narrow perspective. That perspective sees authentic America as Anglo-European in politics and economics, with a paranoid style that considers anything outside of that definition of America as evil, and needing destruction.

In Laos and Vietnam, this American nativism saw self determination of the people in Indochina as a threat to the American way of life. The paranoia refused to see the inherent message of freedom in the motives of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists, despite the fact that the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence is nearly a direct copy of the American Declaration of Independence.⁶³

The arrest of Vang Pao, for continuing the mission he was given in 1962, represents how nativist-fueled policy abroad creates refugees in crisis, who are unable to break free from the devastation caused to them and their homelands by the American nativist wars. These refugees then come to the United States, unable to live anywhere else, and struggle to assimilate. They are people lost in time and space, seeking justice that can not be gained because the mission failed, and the United States definitely lost interest in their former allies. The lost allegiance is yet another manifestation of the nativism of the mission, which considers only the American ideals as important, and minimizes the sacrifice of those who are not born in America, and who do not hold Anglo-European heritage.

This feedback loop undermines what American was meant to stand for. Imperialism, in the name of an imagined identity, is a far cry from the nation that was born out of immigration and diversity, where someone might resettle for the chance at a better life, independent from the Anglo-European social hierarchy. Imperialism creates a feedback loop of hatred that can cause more violence against the United States, a term referred to as “blowback” by members of the intelligence community.⁶⁴

Interrupting this feedback loop will require many steps. It has been in place for over one hundred years. It will not dissipate tomorrow. Understanding of this feedback loop will be an important starting point. The American people need to know how the desire for an American way of life to be fostered around the world creates a nativist feedback loop. If the drive to define America in terms of an Anglo-European model can be identified, then it can be addressed. In this way the definition of what it means to be an American can be altered to be more inclusive and tolerant. Through inclusivity and tolerance, the wars abroad can end and acceptance of all peoples at home can begin.

Sadly, for Vang Pao, this is not a future he will ever see. A few years after his release General Pao died in 2011, in Clovis, California, far from his highland homeland. He was 81 years old. Houa Thao, a Hmong refugee, said in an interview with The Fresno Bee in 2007, “He is like the earth and the sky.”⁶⁵ To the Hmong, Vang Pao was their world, even after he led them on a mission that made them refugees lost in time and space.

General Vang Pao's request to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery was denied on February 4, 2011.⁶⁶ U.S. military rules frown upon displacing U.S. soldiers, by burying non-soldiers or foreigners at Arlington.

Chapter 2: The Secret War

The United States involvement in Vietnam from 1945 until 1975 is a well-documented and tragic history, a failure of foreign policy and human understanding. The toll of this failure is well-established, having wasted the lives of 48,000 American soldiers and nearly 3 million Vietnamese. Among the many dark and disturbing lessons of this era is the story of the Royal Lao Army, led by an illiterate Hmong tribesman named Vang Pao, who would become one of the most successful guerilla fighters of that age.

The Royal Lao Army and General Vang Pao were created by the United States Central Intelligence Agency for the purpose of attacking North Vietnam. Acting as a surrogate army for the United States, the Royal Lao Army became a conscript in an effort to expand American ideological control over Southeast Asia. This effort ignored the reality of the Hmong desire for independence, and for a free and democratic Laos, favoring instead to focus on an obtuse perspective: stemming the expansion of communism from North Vietnam. The result of America's foreign policy in Laos was creating a people without a country, and turning the Hmong into a refugee population, persecuted at home and unwanted abroad.

The Hmong refugees were like other post-colonial populations, who mistakenly saw their identity as part of a larger imperial campaign, but realized too late that they were never included in the grand designs of an empire. The exclusion of the Hmong, like

other refugee populations, was due to the nativism of the Vietnam conflict -- the ideology that the American way of life is superior, thus trumping local self determination. In this story, American Exceptionalism, indeed created refugees of the Hmong.

Nativism sees the American way of life as defined by an Anglo-European tradition in culture, language, religion and economics. The nativist perspective seeks to expand the cultural superiority of the United States, spreading democracy and western capitalism abroad through military intervention. The impact of the violence of these interventions creates refugee populations that are considered a threat to the American cultural identity, as the people fleeing American violence abroad seek safety within the boundaries of the United States. Preventing those refugee populations from arriving in America becomes a reflexive nativist result, on the domestic front, to the nativism fight abroad.

The Secret War in Laos was a mission of the United States to express western democracy and capitalism into Southeast Asia. This mission was grounded in a mindset and world perspective that viewed democracy and capitalism as the best way to structure a society. This belief reflected a view of American governance, economics and social traditions as superior to all others, intentionally ignoring the independence and self determination of the people of Southeast Asia. This was nativism masquerading as foreign policy.

The Hmong were a means to an end in a small part of that nativist foreign policy. The failure of the Secret War, and the larger mission in Southeast Asia, forced the Hmong to flee Laos as refugees, unable to return. These refugees in turn become alien

populations inside America that feed into the nativist misconception of American identity, a belief that is expressed in restrictions on immigration and greater ideological warfare abroad.

The history of refugee populations in American history reveals that groups who immigrate to the United States often meet resistance to their assimilation, both from individuals and from law. These barriers to naturalization and assimilation represent nativism at work in domestic politics and immigration law. Together with the nativism of the foreign policy of the U.S., refugees represent the cause and the effect simultaneously of this nativism.

In essence, the Vietnam War is an example of a feedback loop of nativism, expressed through overseas wars of ideology, that create immigration pressures in the form of refugees of those wars, that feed the fear and ignorance that is the basis of nativist belief, that results in renewed nativist policies at home and abroad.

The Hmong are an example of the terrible effects of American ideological foreign policy, which is manifesting itself again in the current War on Terror, creating new refugee populations and fueling renewed nativism within the United States. Identifying the cycle of violence, nativism and refugee creation is the first step in interrupting the history of this cycle.

The Cold War Comes To Laos

The Cold War came to Laos from Vienna, Austria, where U.S. President John Kennedy met with the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in June of 1961. At that

meeting the two leaders issued a joint statement on Laos, declaring their support for “a neutral and independent Laos.”⁶⁷

Like many Cold War communiques, this one included subtexts that might seem to contradict the intended message. As the two Cold War leaders were announcing their intentions that Laos remain independent, they were also negotiating intervention in Laos to distribute aid to the people displaced by the fighting in neighboring Vietnam.⁶⁸ It was a very “Cold War moment,” where pledges of independence came with programs designed to create intervention and dependency.

The United States had trained 9,000 Hmong tribesmen to transport rice to tens of thousands of their people who were displaced from their traditional homeland because of the fighting in Vietnam. The CIA had brought the Air American transport effort into Laos to bring in supplies and develop airstrips for the transport of future deliveries. These initial “Victor Sites” as they were named, grew to become over one hundred “Lima Sites” by late 1964, and more than four hundred sites by the early 1970’s.⁶⁹

As the evidence will reveal, these aid distribution efforts were always intended to become a covert military expression of the imperial war for control of Southeast Asia. The nativist effort is inherent in the denial of the independence of the Hmong and the Laotian people to be free from the very beginning.

Edward G. Lansdale was a Major General serving at one point in the Army, and later in the Air Force. He advised the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs in 1961, General Maxwell Taylor. In the Lansdale Memo to Maxwell Taylor on Unconventional Warfare in Southeast Asia, it states that the intention of this early effort is to ultimately project force from the region against Vietnam. It is telling that this memo predates the direct entry of the U.S. into the campaign against North Vietnam, suggesting an alternative motive for the operation than just assistance to the local population.

The memo, which was undated, but has been identified by the *New York Times* as originating sometime in July of 1961, states that

About 9,000 Meo tribesmen have been equipped for guerrilla operations, which they are now conducting with considerable effectiveness in Communist- dominated territory in Laos. ...Estimates on how many more of these splendid fighting men could be recruited vary, but a realistic figure would be around 4,000 more, although the total manpower pool is larger.⁷⁰

This identification of the Meo, also known as Hmong, as guerilla operatives reveals the military purpose of the CIA operations in the region for almost immediately after the Kennedy-Khrushchev announcement of intentions for Laotian independence.

The need to assist the Hmong in their fight against Vietnamese Communists forces made the mission in Laos one of imperial control and not just refugee management from the beginning. It was American imperialism because it sought to extend American influence and control over a region, regardless of the consent of the people. No where in the Pentagon Papers memo from Lansdale to Taylor on unconventional warfare in Laos does it mention the independence of the Hmong or the Laotians as part of the mission.

The Lansdale Memo describes the leadership as under control of the CIA, with military advisors already present in the region to direct military operations. Early in the memo, the scouting of the Hmong people for good commanders was evident. The CIA and U.S. military identified a young Hmong tribesman as a potential leader for their surrogate army.

Political leadership of the Meos is in the hands of Touby Lyfoung, who now operates mostly out of Vientiane. The military leader is Lt-Col Vang Pao, who is the field commander. Command control of Meo operations is exercised by the Chief CIA Vientiane with the advice of Chief MAAG Lao's: The same CIA paramilitary and U.S. military teamwork is in existence for advisory activities (9 CIA operations officers, 9 LTAG/Army Special Forces personnel, in addition to the 99 Thai PARU under CIA control) and aerial resupply.⁷¹

The refugee problem created by this military adventure is anticipated by American leaders in advance of the war to come in the next decade. The memo describes the need to consider the Meo/Hmong people, but is absent any details on how their needs will be met in the post-conflict Laos environment.

The memo describes the need in terms of the ideological conflict, never mentioning the desire of the Hmong to be free and independent. Ironically, the memo identifies a problem the Hmong face as being over-run by Communists, the cause being that the Hmong men are away serving in the insurgent army led by Vang Pao. It is ironic because the Hmong villages would have been safe from Communist attack if the Hmong men were not away fighting for the American cause.

As Meo villages are over-run by Communist forces and as men leave food raising duties to serve as guerrillas, a problem is growing over the care and feeding of non-combat Meos. CIA has given some rice and clothing to relieve this problem. Consideration needs to be given to organized relief, a

mission of an ICA nature, to the handling of Meo refugees and their rehabilitation.⁷²

The importance of Laos was only significant in terms of American ideals, which gave little importance to the needs and aspirations of the Laotian people, especially the Hmong. This is apparent from the earliest American involvement in the region, immediately after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1953.

This military loss to the North Vietnamese created the impression that it was necessary for the United States to intervene for the sake of preserving the freedom of the people who lived in Southeast Asia. Without any sincere interest in the region, beyond the desire to spread the ideological argument, nativism is easy to see in the motives of the Americans. In the Pentagon Papers, this nativist calculation is plainly apparent. In a section of the Pentagon Papers entitled, "Reappraisal of Domino Theory After Dien Bien Phu", the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, expresses that the loss of Southeast Asia would not be of significant importance for the interests of the United States because the region is a small player economically.

Secretary Dulles in a press conference on May 11 (four days after the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu) observed that "Southeast Asia could be secured even without perhaps Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia." He went on to note that although he would not want to underestimate the importance of these countries he would not want either to give the impression that "if events that we could not control, and which we do not anticipate, should lead to their being lost that we would consider the whole situation hopeless and we would give up in despair. In a remark at the press conference that has later deleted from the official transcript, Dulles said that Laos and Cambodia were important but by no means essential because they were poor countries with meager populations."⁷³

Evident from this secret document is the sincere intention of the United

States to project its conception of the proper society, based upon an Anglo-European conception of politics and economics, and without sincere interest in the freedom for the people upon whom American intends to exert this influence. The Secretary of State expressed that Laos was not essential to the interest of the United States because the people of Laos were poor and “with meager populations.”⁷⁴ The perspective suggests that American ideology values individuals based upon the wealth of the country and the size of the population. This perspective, a version of *realpolitik*, is also reflective of American nativism. The value of the people of Laos was seen only in terms of their value to the United States, and not, as advanced publically, in their common love of freedom with the United States.

Money for Nothing

Within a year after the Lansdale memo was drafted, the CIA’s influence in the area would cause the overthrow the government of Laos. This unstable situation only increased the CIA mission in Laos, hoping to gain more direct control in preventing the country from falling into the sphere of influence of the North Vietnamese government. While not planned in advance, the coup was a result of influence of aid provided to Laos by the United States. The money created an environment that destabilized the social, political and cultural independence of the nation.

This perversion of Laotian society by American assistance is another example of the nativist influence of American foreign policy. Assuming aid would assist the

Laotians, the United States interjected western capitalism and corruption into a society unfamiliar with the corrupting influences of western capitalism and the corrosive influence of money in politics. According to Roger Warner, a historian who has researched the ebb and flow of what would become known as The Secret War, the effort was based upon a cost/benefit analysis of the money invested in the region, to bring about an outcome that served the purposes of the United States, regardless of the impact it may have on the local people or society at large.

The Lansdale memo describes the soft power of the United States in Laos: “There is also a local veterans organization and a grassroots political organization in Laos, both of which are subject to CIA direction and control and are *capable of carrying out propaganda*, sabotage and harassment operations. Both are located (in varying degrees of strength and reliability) throughout Laos.”⁷⁵

The propaganda agenda of the U.S. mission is key to understanding how the United States was involved in a nativist effort overseas. The propaganda reference here is the projection of the belief that the western, democratic and capitalist perspective, that places whites at the top of a social hierarchy, which the U.S. wanted transplanted into Southeast Asia.

Awareness of this nativism is not clear, of course, because of the tradition of white privilege. This is the condition allowing white Americans to deny their actions are based in racism and bigotry if the motives can, in any way at all, be described as originating from any other motivation. White privilege in Southeast Asia in the 1960’s allowed for the war to be seen as a Cold War conflict, essential to the survival of the United States.

Later it would be acknowledged to have been an imperial war, ignorant of the realities on the ground; a failure of vision that even Robert S. McNamara would acknowledge in his review of the war.⁷⁶

Roger Warner argued that this blind nativism then undermined the independence of the Laotian government, writing, “The U.S. caused the coup unintentionally. Starting in 1957 the U.S. had spent more on foreign aid to Laos per capita than it had on any other nation. It worked out to about \$150 per Laotian, twice the average person's annual income, though the average Laotian didn't receive a penny of the aid.”⁷⁷

Indeed the influence of the American effort to induct Laos into a western style capitalist world view created a level of political corruption that was counter to the ideology that the United States purported to be advancing through its intervention. Warner further notes, some of the money went to support pro-American candidates in an election. They won by lopsided, not to mention embarrassing, victories in balloting that was obviously rigged.⁷⁸ The corrupting influence of money in elections has been well established, yet it did not appear to enter into the thinking of American covert advisors in Laos. The only apparent downside to the diminishment of a free and independent democracy in Laos appears to have been that it was embarrassingly obvious that it was due to the corrupting influence of American money in the politics of Laos.

The money and influence of those advisors to distribute the aid made them *de facto* insurgents against the Laotian government's fledgling democracy. The first victim of the United States mission in Laos was the independence of its government, something never considered by the American advisors. The Laotian government's sovereign status

does not appear to enter into their consideration before flooding the impoverished nation with funds that would poison its political tradition. The absence of this consideration reflects the nativist perspective of the American agents in Laos, choosing to see their actions as legitimate regardless of the negative impact they might have, because those interests reflected the American concept of its cultural supremacy.

Evidence of this negative public relations effect can be seen years earlier, however. Prior to American involvement in the insurgency on Laos, discussions with the French colonial government and the United States reveals that there was awareness that the role of western powers in this conflict came with a difficult rationale. In a Memo of Conversation, drafted by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and recorded in the Pentagon Papers, the reality of the nativist mission that the French and the American governments were backing seems apparent. In the memo, Dulles writes of the aggression by communist forces against the government of Laos. He discussed with the French Foreign Minister Bidault and the French Prime Minister Mayer the question of raising objection in the United Nations Security Council.⁷⁹ The objection would be against the intervention of American forces to defend Laos from Vietnamese attack.

The Pentagon Papers also contain a National Security Council memo that states, “Our effort has therefore shifted from the negative one of attempting to prevent disastrous concessions to the Pathet Lao to the positive one of helping the Lao government carry out the settlement already reached, with a minimum of damage to the Free World position.”⁸⁰ This reflects the view that compromise with communism was seen as failure, and support of violence was preferred. The United States was preparing to

intervene with military aid to create an insurgency in Laos because it believed that diplomacy with communism was in alignment with the American ideological worldview.

The influence of the United States foreign policy in Southeast Asia had already toppled the government of Laos by 1961, and created a refugee population among the Hmong tribesmen. The continued and increased involvement of the CIA in the Secret War in Laos would militarize the Hmong, further alienating them from their compatriots, ultimately making their continued presence in their homeland impossible, relegating those Hmong who remained behind after the war to a persecuted minority. The knowledge of this tragic legacy kept the Hmong refugees in America trapped in a desperate effort to continue the fight in Laos, leading to the plot to attack the government on Vientiane in 2007 and the arrest of General Vang Pao by undercover agents of the ATF.

The American Way is the Best Way

The corruption of the Laotian democracy in 1962 played a part in the invasion of Laos by communist forces in May of that year. When communists seized the provincial capital of Nam Tha in northeastern Laos, President Kennedy ordered 3,000 American military personnel into Thailand, in anticipation of a defense of greater Laos if necessary.

Laos continued to dissolve into chaos because of the influence of American foreign policies and intervention by communist neighbors. The belief that communism could not be chosen by the local people was a belief so strongly held by the American leadership that it overshadowed any consideration of the popular will. It may not be clear that the people of the region wanted to choose communist leadership, but in the absence of influences by western powers bent on seeing their view of good government in place in Laos, the real desire of the Laotian people can never be truly known. The view from an American perspective was that the American way of western democratic capitalism was the only alternative for the region. This narrow perspective reflected the nativist belief that the “American Way” was the best way.

Roger Warner explains this perspective as being prominent in the minds of the CIA officers who led the American effort in Laos. Edgar Buell, an International Service Volunteer with the U.S. Agency for International Aid, led the initial contact with the Hmong, helping to establish them as the guerilla army the United States needed to counter the communist influence. Warner wrote of Buell’s perspective, “As a people, the Vietnamese had been trying to take over Laos for centuries, long before communism

existed; their own country was crowded and they wanted more land. But Buell, a fervently patriotic American, saw the struggle for Laos in terms of Cold War morality, as a struggle between free world good and communist evil.”⁸¹

There, from the very beginning, is the now established consensus that the American adventure in Southeast Asia denied the reality of the situation in favor of a perspective blinded by Cold War ideology.

While this revelation is not insignificant, combined with the understanding of American nativism, it begins to take on yet another dimension. When seen as a manifestation of a deeper American characteristic, the perspective that blinded the CIA in Laos becomes a feature that continues to undermine and influence the American society in a negative manner.

The Paranoid Style of American Politics

In his famous 1964 essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, historian Richard Hofstadter described the character of the American perspective on the world as extreme and binary. He wrote: “Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated - if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. This demand for total triumph leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid sense of frustration.”⁸² This reflects Edgar Buell’s view that communism was an existential threat anywhere it existed, and that determined the mission and the failure of American

intervention in Southeast Asia. This demand for “total triumph” leads the United States to make unrealistic goals for itself in policies foreign and domestic.

Hofstadter is describing the nativist essence of the American political tradition. In a binary fashion, the American political class sees the world as divided into two camps, us and them. “Good versus bad” colors the perspective of the American government, its people, and their collective view of themselves and the world.

In terms of immigration, this tradition has led to laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924. These barriers to entry into the US reflect a view that some are welcome in America, and others are detrimental to America. The reality of these judgements is weak on evidence and strong on racial bias.

In terms of American foreign policy, the paranoid style of American politics created a conflict in Southeast Asia after World War Two, where the United States felt compelled to inject ideological structures like capitalism and democracy into societies that had no expressed interest in those western traditions. In this view, the United States had no choice but to invade the region. Because of this paranoia, the foreign policy of the American empire was naturally inclined to inject democracy and capitalism into a region of the world that neither invited intervention, nor desired democracy and capitalism from the West. In order to frame the region as one in peril, the nativist tradition of the United States defined the conflict as essential, creating an emergency situation where no emergency existed, not in real terms of in terms of national interest.

Indonesia

It is important to understand the wars in Indochina in terms of a larger geopolitical strategy for American nativism. While the war in Laos and Vietnam failed, it could be argued that it succeeded in Indonesia. In that country, while Americans were actively fighting to “defend freedom” with boots on the ground in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the U.S. government acted as a support mechanism to aid the Indonesia army in its overthrow of the Indonesian government.

The army, supplied by American military aid, killed the Indonesian communists in a genocide that claimed the lives of nearly two and one half million people. The United States aided this killing, as it saw the goals of the military in alignment with its own goals for the region and the world in strict Cold War terms.⁸³

Historian Geoffrey Robinson has suggested that "without the army's logistical and organisational leadership ... the mass killings could not have happened".⁸⁴ He argues the U.S. and British governments who -- for reasons of cold war realpolitik -- facilitated the army's crackdown. According to Robinson, they waged a devious campaign of psychological warfare before, during and after the massacres, in the hope of giving the army a pretext to act against the communists. The purpose was to suppress accurate reports of the murders, and promote a positive view of the outcome in the fight against communism. U.S. diplomats and the CIA's Indonesia station gave the army money, equipment and lists of Indonesian communists.

The killing of the communist movement in Indonesia represents a successful

model of nativist foreign policy for the United States. It was successful because it ended without creating refugees and with a positive model for the Cold War goals of the United States. The genocide that the United States sponsored in Indonesia was largely overlooked domestically, an additional benefit for the military and political leadership.

The genocide in Indonesia killed millions who were considered to be expendable. The communists in Indonesia, like those in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, were understood by the paranoid perspective of American politics to be evil and expendable.

This style of American politics creates monsters where none exist. The paranoia drives the United States to create emergencies where no danger lurks. Hofstadter describes this imagined boogeyman in this way, “The enemy is perfectly delineated: he is a perfect model of amoral superman - sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury loving.”⁸⁵ It is obviously and logically incorrect to see the world in these binary terms, creating threats where none exist. While incorrect, it is a real element of the American national psyche. In this way it matters and can be understood to have a value, albeit a negative value in some context.

Because of this paranoid nature, the plight of Southeast Asia became a necessary crusade of the United States to undertake. Allowing the region to determine for itself that communism would be the best system for their self governance was not conceivable for the United States in the Cold War of the 1960's. Any communist expansion, especially after China fell to communism in 1949, was a failure of American foreign policy. Despite the American ideal, stated in the Declaration of Independence, that just governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. The denial of this truth in Laos

did not seem self evident to the Americans, blinded as they were by their nativist belief that they were acting in the best interests of the Laotian, even as they undermined their freedom and independence by corrupting their government with foreign aid.

President John Kennedy announced the importance of Laos to the United States at a press conference on March 23, 1961. Standing at the newly opened State Department headquarters, he explained that,

Laos is far away, but the world is small. Its two million people live in a country three times the size of Austria. The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all - in neutrality observed by us all. I want to make it clear to the American people and to all the world that all we want in Laos is peace, not war; a truly neutral government, not a cold war pawn; a settlement concluded at the conference table and not on the battlefield.⁸⁶

Kennedy's first introduction of the American effort to aid Laos reveals his nativist perspective in his own foreign policy. Kennedy explains that the safety of a nation far away, small in size and almost unknown to most Americans at the time was essential to the safety of the United States.

The expression of this paranoia gives a framework of understanding to the entire Cold War, and to a certain extent to much of the history of US foreign policy. According to Hofstadter, "The Paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms - he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders whole systems of human values."⁸⁷ In short, the enemy must be matched and defeated always and everywhere, as the enemy is the embodiment of evil and will constantly seek to destroy the United States both from within and from without. The consequence of not being eternally vigilant is the destruction of life as it is conceived by the American political

perspective.

In Kennedy's comments on March 23, 1961 we can see how this paranoid style takes shape around the mission in Laos. The communist enemy threatens the safety and neutrality of Laos, and thereby it threatens the security of the United States. This logic defies reality, bending the absurd to fit a desired perspective. If Laos were to become communist, then more of the world would be in a system unaligned with the American conception of right; the American system. The world, in terms of the paranoid style of American politics, needed to conform to the view that the American way was the best - and only- way for everyone.

Racial Scripts

The nativist perspective in Southeast Asia is reflected in domestic immigration restrictions on the homefront. Historian Linda Kerber wrote of this characteristic of the American political tradition in *The Journal of American History*, describing the instinct to divide the world into binary camps with domestic consequences. According to Kerber, the paranoia that drove the United States into Vietnam is reminiscent of the paranoia that limited immigration to the United States. Immigrants initially were welcomed, but in an uneasy way. She wrote, "When confused welcome gave way to fear, we had the Immigration Reconciliation Act of 1924, now we have Proposition 187 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996."⁸⁸ Just as the mission in Laos was initially born out of sincere desire to assist a displaced people, it quickly gave way to an aggressive and violent effort to save some and destroy others. This

nativism perverted the altruism of the effort in Laos, transforming it from a mission of charity to a mission of nativist empire.

This marriage of Hofstadter's ideas about the paranoid style of American politics and the experience of the Hmong applies a relatively new historiography to immigration and foreign policy. It adopts the "relational approach" of Natalia Molina, a historian of immigration who uses racial scripts to describe the experience of one immigrant group as similar to another group. In her approach, Molina changes the traditional focus of immigration history, away from the individual experience, and examines it using a racial script, where immigrant groups are cast in terms that are reused over and over again by the majority to define, limit and exclude new immigrants from the American identity.⁸⁹ The Hmong experience is not unlike the experience of immigrant and refugee groups that come before and after their relocation after the Secret War in Laos. Using the racial script model of Molina allows for a pattern to be examined; a pattern that reveals a tragic error repeating itself in a cycle stretching over decades.

The racial script of the Hmong begins with their importance to the foreign policy of the United States. As the mission in Laos grew from 1961 to 1964, the change from help to harm, and from sanity to paranoia can be observed.

Early on the CIA knew it needed help. It had only two officers in country, Bill Lair and Edward Buell. Lair was straight out of Langley, while Buell had come to the mission via USAID, helping to spearhead the aid effort before becoming involved in the insurgency against communist creep in Laos. These two men represented "true believers" in the nativist mission of the United States in Southeast Asia in the 1960's. To them the

fight was an existential clash between the west and the Soviet Union. Any renegade fighters who could be culled into the pro-western camp were welcome, regardless of their motives; they practiced a “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” approach to policy. These men were hardened Cold Warriors with a view to expanding western capitalism and pro-American democracy into Laos, regardless of the will of the people.

In 1959, the United States was already moving toward a war footing in the region of Southeast Asia. The geostrategic placement of Laos made it particularly valuable in the eyes of these American agents. The country of Laos lies directly south of China, a major Communist threat, and South and West of Vietnam, a growing concern for them in 1959. Additionally, fragile allies like Thailand and South Vietnam were south of Laos, making the Kingdom a perfect place from which to control the entire region of Southeast Asia. If control was not possible, then it denial of control by America’s enemies was just as valuable. In short, American control or regional chaos both supplied the desired outcome for the United States.⁹⁰

“He’s the one we’ve been looking for.”

To exert region control or to sow regional chaos, the United States needed surrogate actor who could project this influence. This is where the Royal Lao Army became key to the plans of the United States. Supplying a guerrilla army was not a problem, as the CIA was able to bring huge amounts of supplies into the country. Leadership, however, was what was needed to make this plan come together. The United States sought advice from Thai commanders in the area, who were familiar with the people and the geography. Col. Pranet Ritchenchai, a Thai commander, made a sweep of the country in search of the proper person to lead this insurgent army. Ritchenchai returned to Bill Lair with a simple message. “He’s the one we’ve been looking for.” he reported.⁹¹ He was a Hmong tribesmen call Vang Pao.

Vang Pao was about five feet tall, with a constant smile and a small wart above his left eyebrow. His face was round, bright and tanned. Born in 1931 in the Plain of Jars, Vang Pao was the middle son of a peasant father, from a family of no real significance in the Hmong people. During World War Two he worked as a courier for the French, hiding in the countryside from the Japanese occupiers. After the war, Pao trained as a policeman, excelling and graduating first in his class from the police academy in Vientiane. When the French were expelled from the region in 1954, Vang Pao became a captain and then a major in the Royal Lao Army. In 1959 he met with the United States representatives in Laos, who were starting to aid the Laotians in their suffering from the encroachment by Vietnamese Communists.

Lair wanted to investigate how Vang Pao would fit as a potential leader of the guerilla force in Laos. Pao claimed he could help the American effort, supplying ten thousand men, as long as the Americans supplied enough guns. Vang Pao said, “They want to keep their way of life and follow their own leaders. They want to fight the communists. They will follow me, and I am loyal to the king.”⁹²

The CIA selected Vang Pao to lead their guerilla army in Laos. The two CIA agents on the ground in Laos sought a leader who could not only fight for them, but grow their force into a significant army. James Lair and Richard Burr, both American agents in Laos, were seeking someone for their surrogate, to lead their fight against Vietnamese Communists in North Vietnam.

Vang Pao saw that the Americans were interested in him and the Hmong, and quickly understood the opportunity that such interest represented. The Americans quickly saw that Vang Pao had a violent side. For example, he regularly kept prisoners sleeved inside fifty-five gallon barrels in holes in the ground. He was not above summarily executing prisoners, or even members of his own tribe who fell out of his favor. Despite these obvious barbarities, the Americans felt that Vang had the right balance of leadership and ruthlessness to lead their guerilla army. Vang was strong willed, intelligent yet illiterate, energetic and intuitive. He loved the Hmong deeply as a people, but had within him the discipline to make hard choices, even on life and death matters, easily and without remorse.⁹³

Opium cultivation was a cultural tradition for the Hmong, growing, using and selling the drug grown in their hilly regions. Vang Pao did not use the drug, but did not stop the drug trade. Vint Lawrence warned Vang that the CIA would not tolerate participation in the drug trade. If Vang was ever caught running opium, Lawrence warned him, the CIA would not intervene to save him. Nevertheless, the CIA did not stop Vang and the Hmong from continuing to harvest and sell opium during the Secret War. In terms of law, Vang Pao seemed flexible in his approach, but in terms of politics he was just as hard line as the CIA, and the nativism that guided their approach to Laos. Vang Pao saw capitalism as good, communism as bad. The world was divided into good guys and bad guys, for Vang Pao, and he was smart enough to side with the good guys.⁹⁴

Vang Pao and his politics, his willingness to kill and his belief in his own righteousness fit well with the paranoid style of American politics. As further described by Hofstadter, "I think there is a deeper eschatological significance that attaches to the person of the renegade: in the spiritual wrestling match between good and evil which is the paranoids archetypal model of the world, the renegade is living proof that all the conversions are not made by the wrong side. He brings with him the promise of redemption and victory."⁹⁵ Vang Pao represented that wrestling match between good and evil. He was a renegade, willing to fight for the cause of the Americans, representing the promise of redemption and victory for both himself, the Hmong and the American cause against the spread of Communism. If the Americans could make Vang Pao into their surrogate in the fight against communism, it could represent a redemptive victory compensating for the loss of China to the Communists in 1953.

But Vang Pao was unwittingly not leading a redemptive crusade for the people of Laos. He was leading a nativist crusade for the United States. Like his western colonial patrons, Vang Pao began to see the mission in binary terms. He began to see the people of Laos as enemies to be divided from patriots. He tortured his fellow countrymen, seized their lands and homes, and displaced them if they were assumed to be favoring the Communists over the U.S. backed Laotian government.

As Roger Warner wrote in his book, “It was one thing to torture the enemy, another to let the American people read about it in their morning papers. Luckily for [Vang Pao], the reporters didn’t know about Laos, and didn’t ask him about his torture center at Pah Khao, or about the spies he used among his own people at Long Tieng, or about the ugly, heavy-handed methods his organization was using to recruit teenage boys, now that his army was running short on soldiers.”⁹⁶

The war became one where the noble crusade was lost to the paranoid belief that any sacrifice could be made to achieve victory. The sacrifice of the Hmong people was a tragedy that was never contemplated by the CIA or the American leaders in Washington. Instead, the perspective of the American imperialists was myopic, seeing the war only in terms that reinforced their Cold War thinking, a perspective born out of the paranoid nature of American politics.

To the Americans, Vang Pao and the Hmong did not represent the freedom and independence of the Laotian people, but rather the redemption of their cause through violent victory against godless Vietnamese communism. It is as Hofstadter had described. The renegade Vang Pao was living proof that the nativism of the U.S. gained

conversions, and that Communism could not win the hearts and minds in a similar fashion. Through his belief in the American nativist perspective for the future of Laos, Vang Pao represented to the Americans in Laos evidence of the promise of their ultimate victory over Communism in the Cold War.

Ironically, the lesson was the opposite. The redemption that Vang Pao and the Hmong sought by serving the American war in Laos was to make them into the instrument of their own alienation and failure. As Paulo Freire wrote in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.⁹⁷

The Hmong lost their humanity, in a sense, by becoming the oppressor of the Laotians in the Secret War.

This transformation, from liberator to oppressor, is an inevitable one when nativism drives the foreign policy of the United States. The core mission in Laos was to inject western style democracy and capitalism into the region, regardless of the desires of the people of the region. This belief that American values were supreme over local self determination, is born out of a nativist perspective that American values are superior to local or self determined values. As a result, the instruments of American foreign policy become instruments of oppression.

Chapter 3: The Hmong Diaspora

“You who are so liberal, so humane, who take the love of culture to the point of affectation, you pretend to forget you have colonies where massacres are committed in your name.”

~Jean Paul Sartre,
from his introduction
to *The Wretched of
the Earth*,
by Frantz Fanon

In June of 2007 on a hot afternoon in Sacramento, California, seven men met for lunch at a local Thai restaurant to discuss old times, past adventures and memories of their youth. It was not unlike what old men do, dreaming and reliving the past, remembering the days when they were powerful and important.

After lunch the men exited the restaurant, emerging into the bright heat of the California Central Valley. Walking across the parking lot they climbed inside an RV, where the dreams they had recalled met with the future they still dreamt about. Inside the RV was a stash of weapons, AK-47 assault rifles, laid out like surgical instruments in an operating room or like a diamond tennis bracelet in a jeweler's display.

One of the men, the most famous of the group, picked up an assault rifle like a baseball player might handle a bat years after retirement. The familiarity was still obvious after so many years, on display in his gait and cradle of the weapon.

The man, General Vang Pao, was the leader of the Royal Lao Army, an anti-

Communist guerrilla force that had fought for the United States in Laos in the 1960's to stem the spread of Communism into the country. So many years later, Vang Pao was living as a refugee in Sacramento, but still revered among the Hmong people. One of the men in the RV was not as reverential of Vang Pao, however. In fact, one of the men was an undercover agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the RV was the pinnacle of a six month investigation into plans by the Hmong community to carry out a 9-11 type attack on the government of Laos. Vang Pao was arrested soon after picking up this assault rifle by agents of the ATF for plotting to overthrow the government of Laos, a violation of the Neutrality Act.

The charges carried a maximum life sentence, but would later be dropped by Federal prosecutors, who exercised their power to alter the charges based upon history and consideration of the implications of a conviction for the country. In short, because Vang Pao had fought a secret war for the United States government in Laos he would not be prosecuted for violating a law that prohibited him from continuing to plot and pursue that same war from within the United States.

The Tradition of Nativism in American Immigration

The story of Vang Pao and the Hmong immigrant community reveal the common themes of American immigration history of failed assimilation, destructive government interference (both in push and pull factors), and the institutionalized nativism of the American government. Understanding the story of Vang Pao and the Hmong community is a window into the continuing a harmful legacy of immigration law. The lesson here is

that the imperialist tradition still at work in the United States long after the end of the Cold War, as a cycle of empire that perpetuates racism abroad and at home.

The role of imperialism in creating the Hmong refugees, as well as Vang Pao's subsequent arrest, stem from a *nativist* drive to define Americanism through imperialist nation building. The effort to make Laos a pro-Western democracy, friendly to the capitalist system and government of the United States, led to the armed resistance of Vang Pao's Royal Laos Army. While not nativist in name or mission, the tradition of conquest in the name of American values matches the traditional role of nativism in American history.

There are many similar stories of immigration, nativism and the detrimental effect they have on people who arrive in the United States from abroad, either fleeing their former situation or seeking a new one. These stories reveal that the experience of Vang Pao is not unique, but rather follows a familiar well worn path that other immigrants have trod before. These lessons from history help us to identify the impact of nativist forces within the American mythos and cultural headwinds that propel the exclusion of non-Anglo-European groups and create tensions that could easily be avoided. The tragedy of this tradition of exclusion is that it often leads to violence against the immigrants, and creates the environment of resentment and revenge for nativists and naturalized Americans alike. It need not be so. It was not intended to be this way.

As John Higham wrote in his immigration narrative, *Strangers In The Land*, "...we cannot afford to ignore the simpler ethnocentric judgements that persist beneath the ebb and flow of nativism. Although those judgements often exist where nativism does

not, they provide the cultural subsoil in which it exists.”⁹⁸ It is important to establish the foundations of the American approach to immigration and nationalism into which we can see the experience of Vang Pao. Higham describes the American culture as one based upon an Anglo-European tradition which sees as valid only those who also come from that tradition and ancestry. The validation of this tradition is expressed by invalidating the immigrant groups that diversify and therefore dilute this tradition. The cultural subsoil that Higham describes maintains itself by weeding out the transplanted cultures that do not conform to the Anglo-European vision of the white majority of American society throughout history.

Hmong Identity and the Legacy of the Cold War

The United States could be said to have fought the wars in Indochina in order to assert its view of the world on the region, where Anglo-European democracy and capitalism were accepted *de rigueur*, as proper and preferred. In fact it was this nativist perspective that blinded the United States from seeing Vietnamese support for Ho Chi Minh for the independence movement it was in reality, instead substituting a Communist threat in its place.

It was because the United States sought to impose liberal democracy and western capitalism upon the former colonies of European empires that the Hmong were enlisted to fight the North Vietnamese. The contradictions of domestic liberal tolerance and imperialist foreign violence was identified by many, among them Jean Paul Sartre.

You who are so liberal, so humane, who take the love of culture to the point of affectation, you pretend to forget you have colonies where massacres are committed in your name.⁹⁹

Sartre urged the West to remember the brutality that leads the spearhead of imperialism, and which Vang Pao led for the U.S. in Laos during the Vietnam War. U.S. Cold War mentality saw communism as an existential threat to the "American way of life", a way of life defined by nativist ethnocentric sentiments. Sartre wrote of this in his introduction to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, writing, "Europeans have only been able to make themselves human beings by creating slaves and monsters."¹⁰⁰

At the same time, the Hmong were (and continue to be) a persecuted minority in their ancient Laos homeland, divided from it by their allegiance to the shared code of anti-communism that they embraced when they chose the American concept of liberal democracy. This shared code has acted to freeze the American Hmong community into a continuous frame of reference for their identity ever since. As a result it has placed this community out of time and sync with their ancestral lands, and ironically also within their adopted country. They are, in short, in between cultures.

The Hmong have also retained an identity trapped in the past by the code and frame of reference that defined their resistance in the Vietnam War. They are bound together in exile because of this common frame, always mindful of its significance.

Therefore their path to assimilation is undermined by this frame of reference. The Hmong are trapped in a frame of reference, a cultural loyalty, which limits their ability to assimilate and succeed.

Upright Citizens and Colonists

The continuation of cultural loyalty to those left behind after emigrating is similar to the narrative laid out in the story of Japanese immigrants to California at the turn of the 20th Century in Eiichiro Azuma's narrative, *Between Two Empires*. In it, Japanese immigrants to the United States are mindful of their imperialist colonization of the United States in the name of the Japanese Imperial government. Azuma writes, "...the Japanese in America were from the beginning upright citizens and colonists with a sense of commitment to the Japanese nation and a mission larger than mere self interest."¹⁰¹

The ties that bind the Japanese immigrants to their homeland are just as strong as the ties that bind African Americans to the United States and the Hmong to Laos. In each case the immigrant group transports its original culture to the adopted destination. Each group always assumes that this is a final destination, sincerely attempting to put down roots in the new land. However, each group is simultaneously unable to completely sever the ties to the abandoned homeland. In research done by Jo Ann Koltyk on Hmong culture in America, the ties to the past lives in Laos remain sacred years after immigration to America. She writes, "It is not uncommon to find Hmong families playing homeland videos throughout the day as entertainment...The social context for viewing homeland videos is one of "communal re-creation as participants recall, or re-experience, and share pasts with the group."¹⁰²

For the Hmong and the Japanese, a lesson can be learned. The role of governments engaging in imperialist actions can create forced migrations of people, in

the service of that imperialist government, that lead to hardship and suffering. For the Japanese, it was the struggle to rise economically, in the face of nativist attitudes and government restrictions against Japanese farmers and landowners. For the Hmong, the difficulty arose after they were used by the Federal government as a surrogate army, fighting for the U.S. against Communism in Laos in the 1960s.

The Hmong, like the Japanese retain a sense of national pride. The Japanese were mindful of the will of their Emperor, seeking to carry out his plans for expansion. The Hmong remain painfully aware of the suffering of their fellow Hmong in Laos, plotting to return to fight in their defense.

The Pawns of Imperial Powers

The struggle of the Japanese and the Hmong is similar to the struggle of Cuban refugees, fleeing the Castro regime and finding that they too are pawns in a global game of Cold War fighting. This can be understood by examining the narrative of Cuban migration as told in *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-95*, by Felix Roberto Masud-Piloto. He describes how rebel minority groups can become pawn of competing powers during the Cold War. Like the Cuban refugees before them, the Hmong were used by the United states to oppose communism in an effort to exert nativist imperialism overseas.

As the United States opened wide the doors for Cubans seeking freedom, Castro responded by calling the bluff, sending hundreds of thousands of Cubans to Florida. This tested the limits of the ability of the United States to accept refugees. The transfer

stressed the United States and empowered Castro. The refugees, however, seemed as an afterthought for both governments.

The revolutionary spirit of the Cuban resistance movement created a radical tradition of violence in the name of progress, undermining the legitimacy of democratic traditions and institutions. This radical spirit ultimately necessitated the expulsion of poor and desperate Cubans from the island, in order to cement a government authority, and sadly a dictatorship. Nevertheless, the experience of the revolutionary spirit led the refugees to continue plotting the overthrow of Castro from Miami, leading to a terror campaign by the Miami Cuban community for nearly forty years.

The lesson of immigration history is that radical resistance movements fostered by the United States can become reactionary to the point where compromise is no longer possible when achieving their Cold War mission. For the Cuban exiles the concept of compromise with Castro was unthinkable, and any who suggested it would be rejected or violently attacked.

For the Hmong, even three decades after the end of their fight against in Laos, they were still willing to make plans with an American agent to violently overthrow the government in Laos and to “make it look like the results of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001.”¹⁰³ In the same way, Masud-Piloto writes of the Cuban people in post revolutionary Cuba, “Afterwards, it was much less easy to expect their radical sons (and daughters) to place faith in liberal solutions.”¹⁰⁴ This example of the Cuban Cold War 5th column is merely the Atlantic coast version of the Hmong 5th Column which Vang Pao was arrested for organizing in the parking lot of a

Sacramento Thai restaurant.

The unchanging contours of meaning for the Cuban and Hmong refugees in America make them fixated upon the forces that expelled them to the United States. Despite the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of actual history that makes Cuba decidedly Pro-Castro and Laos a peaceful trading partner of the United States both groups remain determined to undo what was done to them and their fellows. The shared cultural codes which provide the Hmong with a stable frame of reference as a noble community living in exile in the United States does not reflect the reality of the changing nature of history as regarding Laos.

Gatekeepers of the Nation

The investigation of Vang Pao and the Hmong by the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms reveals how the government engaged in nativism against a group deeply loyal to the United States. Like the example of the Chinese in Erika Lee's narrative history, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*, the Hmong experienced similar institutional nativism. Lee explains that, "[b]oth the West's history of extending and reinforcing white supremacy in the region and its unique relationship with the federal government paved the way towards Chinese exclusion and the larger gatekeeper nation."¹⁰⁵ The tradition of White supremacy moved government agents to investigate the Hmong community for possible conspiracy to violate the Neutrality Act.

These ethnocentric judgements tie Vang Pao to American identity, and make the

Hmong symbolic of other immigrant groups who dream of lives in America. As Stuart Hall wrote in his essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, “Our cultural identity reflects the common experiences and shared codes which provide us, as “one people”, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.”¹⁰⁶ Vang Pao and the Hmong community are bound into the American culture through their common experience as anti-communist fighters in the 1960’s.

Massacres Committed In Our Name

The charges brought against Vang Pao and his friends reflect their frozen identity, seeking to win a war long over but never ended in their reality. The frame of reference of the Hmong challenged the supremacy of the United States to determine when its imperialist wars would cease.

The nativism of the agents of the ATF sought to imprison Vang Pao for his frozen identity, because American nativism has moved on from the imperialist efforts Van Pao led for the United States in the 1960’s. To continue to seek victory when the United States government has reframed the conflict would undermine the nativist supremacy of Vang Pao’s white masters.

Federal prosecutors did not explain why charges against Pao were dropped, while maintaining them against ten others, except it is within the power of prosecutors to consider “a person’s culpability and history as well as the consequences of a conviction.”¹⁰⁷ It was best described by Phillip Smith, executive director at the Center for

Public Policy Analysis in Washington D.C., "He's viewed as a quasi martyr...If these charges had remained, the government would have been putting itself on trial for betraying the Hmong."

The Hmong community felt deeply betrayed by the investigation and arrest of Vang Pao. This insult was only compounded when Vang Pao was later denied military burial honors at Arlington National Cemetery, despite his actions in the service of U.S. military goals in Indochina during the Vietnam War Era.¹⁰⁸

Stuart Hall's description of the shifting division and vicissitudes of our history applies clearly to the experience of Vang Pao and the Hmong community in the U.S. Their shared cultural code of liberal democracy and capitalist freedom meshed well at one time with the nativist imperialism of the United States. Over time, however, this stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning was not shared by the United States government in the same way toward Lao, despite that the Hmong continued to hold it dearly. The result was that the Hmong were left unassimilated and isolated in time, space and culture because of the role of the United States in using them as a pawn of the Cold War.

Frantz Fanon wrote pointedly of this disparaging outcome in his seminal treatise on colonization and the colonized, *The Wretched of the Earth*. He wrote, "This new reality, which the colonized are now exposed to, exists by action alone... The people in arms...march on... Violence alone, perpetuated by the people, violence organized by the leadership, promotes the key for the masses to decipher social reality. Without this struggle, without this praxis, there is nothing but a carnival parade and a lot of hot air."¹⁰⁹

Immigrant groups to the United States bring with them essential elements of their home culture, frozen in their perspective, and therefore divorced from the changing nature of that culture. This creates a separate reality, unique from the original and separate from the adopted culture. This separate frame, frozen in time and reality is needed to preserve the identity of the immigrant group, but ultimately undermines their assimilation.

American resistance to these groups has always been based on nativist ideology and identification, a force that was expressed globally during the Cold War in colonial wars for American political and ideological control. Vang Pao and the Hmong seemed to need the colonial struggle to define their social reality in exile in the United States because of the interference of the United States, their inability to assimilate and the efforts of the government to undermine them and imprison their leaders. Because of this, the struggle defined the community, leading it to pursue a fantasy insurgency, created in a government investigation and sting operation.

Without the struggle, it is just as Fanon describes, and just as we see in Sacramento on that hot July day in 2005. The Hmong veterans, led by Vang Pao, paraded across the Thai restaurant parking lot, through a lot of hot air in pursuit of a dream that exists in a frame of reality distant in geography and time. This carnival parade ended with a show trial, an insult at Arlington National Cemetery for Vang Pao, and the betrayal of another immigrant community in the long history of American immigration.

Chapter 4: The Feedback Loop

The United States has a long and controversial history of wars against other states and territories. It is a dark and controversial history, because many Americans refuse to hear about the wars fought by the United States, in terms other than glorification of the crusade and the advancement of the ideals of America. Indeed, American presidents often announce that the United States is the greatest force for good in the world, and that the United States has freed more people from tyranny than any other nation. These views of America's overseas adventures are representative of the nativism that is projected abroad through violence. The defense of that nativism comes through appeal to patriotism, justice, and love of the military. All of these deflect from the reality of the wars, fought in the name of democracy, capitalism and freedom. The reality is one that suggests a world view that is couched in white supremacy, and expressed through cultural superiority, Anglo-European imperialism and naked capital interest.

The history of America's wars reveal a tradition of deception, often arguing that the nation is defending itself from aggression, when in fact it is aggressively pursuing its nativist self interests. For this examination of the use of foreign policy and war to advance a nativist identity, it is useful to start with the Mexican American War, one of the first expansionist conflicts in U.S. History. Following that example, a pattern emerges when subsequent foreign conflicts are analyzed.

Napoleon on the Stump

The Mexican American War was elective, not having been forced upon the United States, but instead chosen for the nation by the President, James K. Polk. Polk was a uniquely successful president, who was a political unknown before his elevation to the presidency. He promised few things to his supporters, and delivered on all of them, making Polk perhaps the most successful president in the history of the nation. He promised a settling of boundaries with Mexico, the addition of California to the nation, and a deal with Great Britain on the Pacific coastal boundary with Canada. Upon the expiration of his four years in office, he had delivered on all these promises, and promptly did not run again for office. The “Napoleon on the Stump” as he was called, then retired to his home in Kentucky, never to be seen on the national stage again.

In many ways the Mexican American conflict was born out of the nativist desire to extend white supremacy beyond the boundaries of the United States, and to incorporate the institution of slavery in these new areas. The institution of slavery served a double purpose, one of racial hierarchy and economic foundation. The spread of this “peculiar institution” was fundamental to the identity of the United States both economically and socially. This is reflected in documents and iconography of the time.

In an editorial published by Frederick Douglass in his newspaper, *The North Star*, the nativist mission of this foreign aggression is obvious and painful. In his perspective, Douglass sees the war as one of white supremacy manifesting through violence, justified by naked bigotry and racism. Recalling a conversation he heard between two white men,

Douglass explains how the perspective was representative of many in the support they shared for the war with Mexico. “The main argument in favor of the war was the meanness and wickedness of the Mexican people; and, to cap the climax, he gave it as his solemn conviction, that the hand of the Lord was in the work!”¹¹⁰ The argument here was couched in a perspective that the enemy was inhuman, evil and insidious, not unlike the paranoid character of American politics put forward a hundred years later by Richard Hofstadter, in his essay on the American political psyche, entitled *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*.

The Rod To Chastise Them

The force of this line of argument is powerful, and may reveal why it persists to defend American foreign policy today. According to Douglass, the use of a manifest destiny, countenanced by a divine force, is so compelling as to silence all counterargument. “...God was now making use of the Anglo Saxon race as a rod to chastise them! The effect of this religious outburst was to stun his opponent into silence: he seemed speechless; the ground was too high and holy for him; he did not dare reply to it; and thus the conversation ended. When men charge their sins upon God, argument is idle; rebuke alone is needful; and the poor man, lacking the moral courage to do this, sat silent.”¹¹¹ This is the effect of nativism on American foreign policy from early on the American history. The effect of this silencing power was to see nativism become an unchecked influence on future wars, and laws regarding the preservation and elevation of white Americans and Anglo-European cultural atop a racial caste system.

Douglass explained that the war was inevitable, despite the show of opposition in Congress. He wrote in his *North Star Editorial*, published January 21, 1858, “Mexico seems a doomed victim to Anglo Saxon cupidity and love of dominion. The determination of our slaveholding President to prosecute the war, and the probability of his success in wringing from the people men and money to carry it on, is made evident, rather than doubtful, by the puny opposition arrayed against him.”¹¹² Even to observers at the time, the war against Mexico was a war of nativist aggression, plainly and deliberately projected as a war justified in noble terms.

Challenges to those justifications came with a fierce backlash, which Douglass also explained. “No politician of any considerable distinction or eminence, seems willing to hazard his popularity with his party, or stem the fierce current of executive influence, by an open and unqualified disapprobation of the war. None seem willing to take their stand for peace at all risks; and all seem willing that the war should be carried on, in some form or other.”¹¹³ This is an opinion, of course, but it is also evidence that to Frederick Douglass, the war was not opposed by politicians who might have raised objection. The absence of any voices for peace, against what was a war based upon a lie would seem to show that the force of nativist patriotism had overpowered the opposition to the violence it was projecting against Mexico.

The Half Insane Mumbling of a Fever-dream

Even the few voices for peace seem to support the idea that the war could not be stopped by logic or outrage. A young Congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln,

opposed the war, even going so far as to call for President Polk to show him the spot on the map where American blood had been shed on American soil¹¹⁴.

His critique of Polk's aversion to logic is notable for how it describes the force and logic of the nativist tradition. Lincoln declared in his speech, delivered from the House of Representatives on January 12, 1848, "How like the half insane mumbling of a fever-dream, is the whole war part of his late message! At one time telling us that Mexico has nothing whatever, that we can get, but territory; at another, showing us how we can support the war, by levying contributions on Mexico." Lincoln is drawing attention to the lack of consistency which the advocates of the war use to justify and distract criticism.

He continues, "At one time, urging the national honor, the security of the future, the prevention of foreign interference, and even, the good of Mexico herself, as among the objects of the war; at another, telling us, that 'to reject indemnity, by refusing to accept a cession of territory, would be to abandon all our just demands, and to wage the war, bearing all its expenses, without a purpose or definite object[.]'" Lincoln is bordering on satire at this point in his rejection of Polk's logic on the war, making it obvious that the war is about an unspoken support for slavery, a concept justified by nativism.

He concludes, “So then, the national honor, security of the future, and every thing but territorial indemnity, may be considered the no-purposes, and indefinite, objects of the war!”¹¹⁵ This turn of phrase exposes that Lincoln sees the use of nationalism, patriotism and nativism as illogical and yet the root causes of the war against Mexico. The fever of nativism expressed through violence in foreign crusades for American identity, exactly the noble calling of the Mexican American War, meant that even men as great and patriotic as Abraham Lincoln were ignored by the voting public.

Maximum Effort to Avoid Acknowledgment

In terms of Laos and Vang Pao, the example of the Mexican American War can be readily connected. The effort to subdue the region for America’s strategic goals was a form of nativism akin to the call for conquest against Mexico. The interesting comparison here is in the reversal of American expressions and admission of nativism as the core philosophy for the war. In Laos, it was an open secret that the United States was operating an insurgent guerrilla operation, violating the terms of the Geneva Accords.

The message of this brazen violation was intended to send a message to North Vietnam that the United States was willing to do whatever was necessary to stem the spread of Communism into the region, even if it meant undermining the international agreements made by the United States. To protect the reputation and diplomatic standing of the nation, however, diplomats constructed a clear strategy of denial in order to maintain the nativist, pro-western, Anglo-European intentions of the mission in Laos. The denial in this case is the evidence of the real intentions.

When Secretary of State Dean Rusk instructed the embassy in Vientiane approval of cross-border ground operations but warns to adopt “maximum effort to avoid acknowledgment”, it was to be done either by “declining comment on communist propaganda charges, if such were original source,” or by “citing apparent navigational error.”¹¹⁶ How, too, like James K. Polk is the efforts by Dean Rusk to divert and confuse any logical analysis of the foreign policy of nativism. In Vietnam the policy was very clearly as unclear as possible.

In the Mexican American War, Abraham Lincoln described President Polk’s logic as “First he takes up one, and in attempting to argue us into it, he argues himself out of it; then seizes another, and goes through the same process; and then, confused at being able to think of nothing new, he snatches up the old one again, which he has some time before cast off.”¹¹⁷ Both Polk and Rusk are unable to logically explain the efforts by the United States to project the American tradition of nativism, believing that white, Anglo-Europeans are superior.

The “Splendid Little War”: Nativism and the Spanish-American War

Perhaps there is no greater example of American nativism driving American foreign policy than the Spanish American War. In 1899 the United States desired to become a member in the brotherhood of empires, taking its presumed place alongside Great Britain, France, Germany, and other European empires. This lust for empire was nobly advanced by prominent American voices, most notably William McKinley.

As president during the Spanish American War, William McKinley argued that

the United States needed to expand its reach beyond the natural boundaries of North America. He was like many of his day who saw the American frontier as essential to the national identity. That identity was born out of a spirit of conquest, spreading Anglo-European culture to regions considered backward and savage. This conquest was achieved at great human cost, as the United States spread across North America, pushed by a sense of noblesse oblige termed Manifest Destiny.

This spirit of nativist expansionism met the edge of the Pacific in the later Nineteenth Century, and needed somewhere to go. To leaders like William McKinley, this meant expanding the United States across the ocean, transforming it into an empire. After claiming the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico from Spain in the Spanish American War (1898-1999), McKinley betrayed his promise of freedom for the Filipino people, explaining,

“ It is nonetheless true, however, that without any original thought of complete or even partial acquisition, the presence and success of our arms at Manila imposes upon us obligations which we cannot disregard. The march of events rules and overrules human action. Avowing unreservedly the purpose which has animated all our effort, and still solicitous to adhere to it, we cannot be unmindful that, without any desire or design on our part, the war has brought us new duties and responsibilities which we must meet and discharge as becomes a great nation on whose growth and career from the beginning the ruler of nations has plainly written the high command and pledge of civilization.”¹¹⁸

The idea of an American empire is problematic and controversial. The push for empire created not only a crisis of identity for the United States, but led to the use of foreign wars to spread a nativist national identity as part of the expanding Empire

Americana. This moment in American history stands as a crossroads from which it is possible to see how the feedback loop of nativism and foreign conflict was first established, intentionally, by the American government. Matthew Frye Jacobson, the William Robertson Coe Professor of American Studies & History and a professor of African American Studies at Yale University writes, “As modern American nationalism took shape within an international crucible of immigration and empire building, some of its harshest stains derived from a disturbing recognition of the barbarian virtues.”¹¹⁹ The virtue of using violence to help develop the character of American greatness in the next generation of Americans goes along with the effort to project this American nativism abroad through foreign warfare. It is ironic to spread civilization through an embrace of barbarity, a contradiction that was obvious to American leaders and yet acceptable. This would suggest that nativism denies the irony of an illogical approach to reality.

President McKinley was not alone in his call for an American empire. He was joined by many newspapers and political leaders who shared his view of American civilization as superior to others in the world. Furthermore the necessity of conquest for civilization was also a commonly held value of the day, promoted by significant voices, none more significant than Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt saw American empire as benevolent, divinely ordained and democratic. He advocated for empire because he believed it would help both the colonizer and the colonized. It would help those who were taken “under wing” by the United States because it would provide liberty and civilization. Jacobson explains that the view was ultimately a step toward the disintegration of the original character of the United States.

He wrote, “If the delicate U.S. experiment in democracy required a particularly virtuous polity, then the nation’s very destiny as ‘steward to the backward races of the world’ and an ‘asylum for the oppressed’ was fraught with peril. American greatness itself... was a corrosive national virtue.”¹²⁰

Jacobsen is identifying how the nature of the American experiment in democracy is dependent upon the influx of people to the nation, in order to maintain its population. At the same time the national character of the nation is defined by the political elite as Anglo-European in decent. These two elements conflict with each other as they diversity of immigration erodes the purity of the national character as defined by American nativism.

“America is God's Crucible”

The counterbalance to this corrosive combination of nativism and immigration is the birth of the American empire. In order to define the character of the United States clearly, and in the process minimize the influence of immigrants bringing undesired traditions, languages and religions, wars for empire served to promote and preserve the national character in a nativism tradition. Fighting for the American way of life became synonymous with American patriotism, even though a single way of life was proscribed by American nativism. Horace Kallen, a professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, wrote that the United States was symbolic of an orchestra, where diverse instruments played together as a beautiful sound.¹²¹

This, unfortunately, was a minority counter argument in 1915 when he wrote his

book, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*. A more popular view can be seen in the work of English playwright and America-phile, Israel Zangwill, who in 1915 wrote the play *The Melting Pot*, became synonymous with American for the next fifty years. In Zangwill's play, the characters exclaim that, "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! . . . the real American has not yet arrived, he is only in the Crucible, I tell you-it will be the fusion of all races, the coming superman!"¹²²

In essence, Zangwill's declaration from the stage was resonant in the hearts of the political leaders and nativists of the United States when they chose to transform the country from a republic into an empire. The desire for a super race of men, leading the world and delivering righteous civilization to the backward savages of the world became the ideal of American patriotism from that point onward. This is the start of the feedback loop of nativism and immigration.

The benefits were intended to be domestic, in addition to international. Theodore Roosevelt felt strongly about the benefits of violence to bring out the best in the American character. He advocated for empire as a way to define and develop the American identity. Theodore Roosevelt in a transcribed conversation with the psychologist G. Stanley Hall claims that, "Over-sentimentality, over-softness, in fact washiness and mushiness are the great dangers of this age and of this people. Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, gaining the civilized ones will be of little avail"¹²³

The expression by Roosevelt of the need for violence and conquest to maintain the American spirit is an essential contradiction in the nativist perspective; an irony that

is represented by the feedback loop of nativism in foreign policy leading to increased immigration restrictions. Indeed it is this feedback loop that needs identification of the feedback is to ever end.

As the United States tried to exert dominance over foreign territories it creates refugee populations that fuel nativism reactions at home. As Jacobson wrote, “This approach to entire peoples as pawns in a vast geopolitical game represented a heightened degree of imperialist vision, which became standard fare over the course of the twentieth century.”¹²⁴ The domestic nativism then fosters more immigration restrictions and more foreign interventions abroad.

Just as Roosevelt and McKinley were advancing the American empire in the name of saving the American identity, the impact upon the United States was simultaneously detrimental. The violence being done in the name of the nation was destroying the original ideal of equality, limited government and freedom upon which the United States was first founded.

Domestically the embrace of “barbarian virtues” and the promotion of an American civilization abroad fostered and emboldened the development of the Eugenics Movement, an early twentieth century offshoot of the Progressive Movement. Eugenics advocates felt that the health and moral welfare of the nation was a risk by the influx of immigrants. They advocated governmental intervention into the lives and freedoms of immigration populations in the name of public health, moral development and improved social order.

The War To Make The World Safe For Democracy

World War One was a watershed moment for the United States, as the people began to see that they did not desire the American Empire as much as their leaders desired it. The entry of the United States into the war was so unpopular that it can be argued that the 1920's were a decade long backlash against everything that President Wilson did while in office. The entry of the United States into World War One represents another manifestation of the feedback loop; the drive for projecting American nativist values abroad leads to a counterbalancing rejection of immigration and refugees from the wars for the American Way.

The method Woodrow Wilson enlisted to bring the U.S. into the war is reflective of the power of the nativist argument. Appeals to American patriotism, democracy and world leadership fit into the nativist definition of the American ideal. Using appeals to these themes in American nativism allowed Woodrow Wilson to bring the U.S. into the war, despite overwhelming opposition to the war before the American declaration of war in 1917.

Indeed, Wilson even capitalized on the opposition to the war in his campaign for re-election in 1916. With public opinion decisively anti-war, Wilson campaigned on a slogan of "He kept us out of war!"¹²⁵ Appealing to the emotional logic of the public gave Wilson a narrow victory in the 1916 election. He then used an appeal to the emotional patriotism of Americans to gain their support for entering World War One, a war they about which had already signaled their emotional rejection.

Despite repeated attacks on American shipping in the years 1915-1917, Woodrow Wilson had not pushed the nation to respond with a declaration of war. It was the interception of a telegram from the German Foreign minister, George Zimmerman, to the German ambassador to Mexico that ultimately convinced Wilson to go to war. This is a dubious influence when given closer examination. The message in the infamous Zimmerman telegram was that if Mexico would agree to attack the United States, in support of Germany, Mexico could expect to receive the lands of New Mexico, Arizona and California in exchange. No evidence has ever surfaced to indicate that Mexico accepted this offer, nor that there was ever a threat to the United States from its Southern neighbor.

Indeed, there is no evidence that even the United States took this imagined threat seriously, as no military response even came after the discovery of this message. While Wilson did receive a declaration of war from Congress to go to war in Europe, the United States military never sent troops to defend the southern border from a Mexican attack.

The strange turn of public opinion, from anti-war to defenders of freedom in a crusade to end all wars, is curious. The American public became rabid supporters of war so quickly because the appeal of nativist ideology and propaganda played upon their emotional sensibilities. Indeed, while Wilson was establishing the Office of Public Information, the first official propaganda office of the U.S. government in American history, crowds of Americans attacked innocent citizens of German heritage or anyone who spoke critically of the war effort. Indeed, even an Ohio minister was beaten by a crowd of angry war supporters when he gave a sermon that was seen as critical of the

war.¹²⁶

William Randolph Bourne wrote about this phenomena in an essay, entitled *The State*, discovered only after his death. In it he described the “spiritual alchemy” that transforms the public from one perspective to another on war, and how they convince themselves that it was a transformation of their own choosing. In *The State*, Bourne lays out the power of the American nativist ideology, born out of the barbarian virtues that were promoted by Theodore Roosevelt. Bourne wrote,

Wartime brings the ideal of the State out into very clear relief, and reveals attitudes and tendencies that were hidden. In times of peace the sense of the State flags in a republic that is not militarized. For war is essentially the health of the State. The ideal of the State is that within its territory its power and influence should be universal. As the Church is the medium for the spiritual salvation of man, so the State is thought of as the medium for his political salvation.¹²⁷

As Roosevelt argued when he told Dr. Stanley that violence was necessary for the American character to continue, here it is evident how Bourne sees the appeal of war in 1917. Despite writing *The State* before the war began, Bourne accurately described how the appeal of violent foreign warfare would unite a nation unconnected by a common ancestry, language or religion. War is the great unifier that nativism uses to fuel it’s wars abroad and its restrictions at home.

Bourne said “War is the health of the State. It automatically sets in motion throughout society those irresistible forces for uniformity, for passionate cooperation with the Government in coercing into obedience the minority groups and individuals

which lack the larger herd sense.”¹²⁸

It is exactly what a nativist would desire in any ideal nativist society. A uniformity of the herd, and a totalitarian control of the identity, the citizenry and the mission of the culture. This was made manifest during the war, as civil liberties were curtailed, immigration was ended, and suspicion of radicals and immigrants permeated the post war 1920s.

The same is evident in Lao with Vang Pao and his Hmong tribesmen in the 1960's. When Vang Pao first met with the CIA field agent Bill Lair, he told him that he had nothing in common with his fellow Laotians who were communists. “I've been in touch with the Communists. They've been around here for years”, Pao told Lair in 1961. “But my people can't live with them. Their life is too different from ours.” How different the life of a highland Hmong tribesman could be from a Laotian communist on the Plain of Jars, a few miles away, would appear to be slight. Yet because he was moved by the nativism of the mission, the powerful pull of a fight for identity and with the financial gain that the Americans could offer, Vang Pao was willing to see his fellow Laotian brothers as alien to him, worthy of death. “We have two choices,” Pao told Lair, “We fight them, or we leave. There is nothing else we can do. If you give us guns, we will fight them.”¹²⁹

It is not unique to the American condition, of course. Nativism and herd mentality are human traits. Jean Paul Sartre wrote of this in his preface for *The Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon. Sartre was describing the post-colonial realization of peoples freed from their European oppression. He wrote, “The European elite decided to fabricate

a native elite, they selected adolescents, branded the principles of Western culture on their foreheads with red hot iron and gagged their mouths with sounds, pompous awkward words that twisted their tongues.”¹³⁰

As the American people embraced the ideology of war, the unity of the nation solidified, and a new generation of American nativist idealism was seared into the cultural fabric of the nation. Indeed after World War One ended, the United States saw a return of the Ku Klux Klan, the passage of restrictive immigration laws, and the execution of radical Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. All of these could be considered hallmarks of the nativism symbolically branded on the foreheads of the next American generation with red hot irons, gagging their mouths, and twisting their tongues.

Vang Pao and the plight of the Hmong went through a similar transformation. When the United States began supporting an insurgency in Laos in the 1960's, the Hmong people were selected by CIA agent Bill Lair. Vang Pao was the man they were looking for, according to Bill Lair. Vang Pao had been a devoted police officer before the United States brought the war to Laos. When the threat of communism made it necessary for the United States to flood Laos with aid, the effects transformed the nation from independence to dependence, and instituted a clear identity for Laos that was defined by the western capitalist, pro-democracy perspective of the United States.

Vang Pao went from being a loyal Laotian citizen to being a loyal American guerilla leader. The Hmong were transformed from a minority ethnic group in Laos into t people without a notion, unfamiliar with the United States and hunted in their native Laos.

Hannah Arendt, a German philosopher and political theorist, described this transformation in her description of the refugees of the First World War . "Once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless."¹³¹

The Red Scare

America after World War One reacted to the war by turning inward, rejecting the diversity that war had unleashed. The reaction of the United States to the war reveals the feedback loop; war for nativist ideals abroad leads to rejection of immigration and a curtailing of civil rights at home. This feedback loop is evident in the 1920's as American moved to limit immigration, redefine citizenship for Anglo-Europeans, and to end diversity of thought that did not adhere to the nativist conception of the national identity.

Emma Goldman was a victim of the post World War One hysteria that was made manifest in the 1920's. Her critique of the nativism that infected the American society made her an enemy of the people in the eyes of the government. She was tried and convicted of conspiracy to defeat the military conscription law, also known as the Selective Service Act. The requirement that all men register for military service was another new tradition established during the First World War, and one that Goldman considered to be a violation of freedom.

The feedback loop of nativism abroad coming home in the form of nativist restricts is clearly seen in the case of Emma Goldman. As an anarchist and a publisher, she represented freedom of thought and freedom of speech. As an immigrant from Russia

she represented the diversity of America that nativists in the political elite wanted to limit. Challenging the forced militarism of the United States made her an easy target for nativists who held the unity of the nation together through militarism, racism and religious bigotry. Emma Goldman was everything that American nativists were not, and therefore they wanted to destroy her.

Goldman summarizes the feedback loop of nativism in her 1908 essay, *"Patriotism, A Menace To Liberty."*¹³² She wrote of the perspective that she opposed, but which would ultimately deport her from the United States. "Patriotism", she wrote, "assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate." Goldman doesn't call it nativism, but it is exactly as a nativist would argue. The idea of national sovereignty is used to justify nativism. "Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot, consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others."

The United States has used this nativism, masquerading as patriotism, to instill support for its foreign wars for nearly two hundred years. The duty of young people to "support the troops" and "be all you can be" is branded into their minds through nativist propaganda that sees the United States as "the greatest for good in the world."¹³³

At home, Americans are taught to despise the "aliens" of other lands. Immigration laws are written to protect the people of the United States from being overrun by alien immigrants seeking to destroy the American way of life. The description of the American

lifestyle as other than inclusive of diversity is itself a nativist perspective. Historian Natalia Milona wrote of the effects of immigration law on society in “*How Race Is Made in America*.” She explains how racial scripts, created from a nativist perspective, help to drive the understanding of race in American history. These scripts are thematic and traditional, reused against new minority groups that are considered unacceptable to the white majority class in America.

Molina explains, “Racial scripts naturalize racist tactics when they get recycled and, in the process, appear justifiable.”¹³⁴ The law banning immigrants from finding safety and opportunity in the United States appear logical to the public. They make reasonable appeals to their conscience. They seem to be based upon traditional understandings of right and wrong.

President Donald Trump recently argued that former president Barack Obama had a ten foot high wall surrounding his home, implying that it justified a wall on the southern border of the United States.¹³⁵ To many Americans this logic is sound, and justifies the restrictions on immigration. It is just as Natalia Molina and Emma Goldman have argued is the hallmark of nativist policy.

Goldman described what the effect of this nativist rhetoric would be upon future generations. “The inhabitants of the other spots reason in like manner, of course, with the result that, from early infancy, the mind of the child is poisoned with blood-curdling stories about the Germans, the French, the Italians, Russians, etc. When the child has reached manhood, he is thoroughly saturated with the belief that he is chosen by the Lord himself to defend his country against the attack or invasion of any foreigner.”¹³⁶ Molina

describes this, explaining how the view of immigrants as evil manifests itself in law. “Manifest Destiny was used by politicians, officials and journalists beginning in the 1840’s to justify westward expansion. As an ideology it expressed a belief that those who were taking over the land were spreading democratic institutions for those who were not capable of self government. Jingoistic politicians, journalists, writers and citizens alike singles out Native Americans especially , and those of non-European origin generally, as not fit for self government.”¹³⁷ This is seen in the rhetoric around Mexico in 1846, in Cuba in 1898, and in wars across the 20th century.

This is how the feedback loop is created in the minds of American in history. The belief in an American identity, based upon Anglo-European ancestry and tradition, is considered ordained by divine power and spread in the name of benevolent civilization. Opposition to this nativist white supremacy is considered evil and regressive, worthy of violence and destruction. It is so inherent in the American tradition that it has married itself into the political thinking of the nation, to see anything outside of this tradition as evil, fearing that it plans to overwhelm the nation and destroy the American people as a constant fear, beating like a drum in the subconscious minds of all white citizens.

Understanding the history and current manifestation of this tradition helps to make sense of the current view on race in American society. Despite awareness of slavery and racism, Jim Crow laws and the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Americans when polled believe that white people are subjected to more discrimination than any other group in the country.

A poll conducted by National Public Radio in October of 2017 found that 55% of white Americans believed that their racial group had been victims of racial discrimination.¹³⁸ How it is possible for a majority of white Americans to come to a perspective so unsupported by evidence can only be understood if we consider the tradition of white supremacy, white privilege and nativism in the history of the United States. As we have seen throughout this examination of nativism in American history, it is a perspective divorced from logic and frequently unsupported by evidence.

Beyond the advent of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, the effects of this feedback loop are observable in how the Cold War changed domestic political perspectives. The view of the New Deal and its social safety programs, necessary to enable the nation to survive the Great Depression, became seen as illegitimate.

This change can be argued to have stemmed from the Cold War animosity toward communism, and a desire to define America in terms of a clear morality, economics and leadership style in the world.

Historian Mae Ngai, wrote of this effect in her book, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. She described how the Cold War changed the perspective of Americans toward their domestic politics: “The advent of the Cold War in the late 1940s, however, quickly eclipsed and stemmed these trends, resituating them in a bipolar world order in which United States liberal capitalist democracy was defined as the “good” of the world and its best hope against the “evil” of Soviet Communism.

American social democracy, as articulated in the popular front politics of the thirties and forties, become de-legitimized as communistic and un-American.¹³⁹ This

revisionist perspective would seem to stem from the ideological discipline that was driving the post WW2 American social code. What formerly had been the saving grace of American life, the New Deal, was now seen as soft, weak and un-American. Because it smacked of socialism, an ideology too close to Communism in the minds of Americans, the New Deal was considered unacceptable, despite the numerous continuing examples of it. The Interstate Highway System, Social Security, Medicare, and the G.I. Bill were all unquestioned in the political discourse of the 1950's, but anything that was targeted was deemed too closely aligned with communism, and was therefore un-American. This illogical perspective is consistent with the nativist approach, lacking logic and based upon weak evidence, as has been made apparent throughout this examination.

One example of domestic policy that became intertwined with Cold War ideology was immigration. The feedback loop begins to come into clearer focus when we consider how efforts to define America abroad in terms of ideology come to define American citizenship and immigration at home in the same nativist ideological terms. Ngai described this as, "unquestioned assumptions about national interest, both economic and geopolitical, have entrenched a nationalist orientation in immigration policy. That nationalism resists humanitarianism and remains blind to the causal connections between the United States global projections and the conditions abroad that impel emigration."¹⁴⁰ In the view of Ngai, the foreign policy projections of the U.S. cemented nationalism into immigration policy. This nationalism is based, she writes, on a clear assumption about the best economic and political system; the American system.

The McCarran-Walter Act

In 1952, Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act, also known as the McCarran-Walter Act. The chief architect of the bill, Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada explained that the law was intended to preserve “this Nation, the last hope of Western Civilization.” He also said, “If this oasis of the world shall be overrun, perverted, contaminated, or destroyed, then the last flickering light of humanity will be extinguished.”¹⁴¹

The law re enacted provisions in the Internal Security Act for the expulsion of aliens whose activities the attorney general deemed “prejudicial to the public interest.”¹⁴² This vague description of the power of the state to expel individuals from within the nation is arguable evidence of the desire to exclude anyone who does not conform with a nativist perspective. While tolerance of difference is possible under the McCarran Walter Act, the possibility of intolerance and racism seems to have been intentionally left within the powers of the legislation.

The use of immigration law to project an ideological profile of what it means to be American is evident in the different application of refugee status for people emigrating to the United States in the Cold War. People fleeing from totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe were often give priority over others seeking to enter the United States for their economic self interest.

While understandable at first glance, this prioritization gave an image of the United States as a bulwark against tyranny, and a safe harbor for those seeking freedom.

Historian Rachel Ida posits another interpretation: “This Cold War distinction [for refugees] has long functioned to underwrite U.S. foreign policy, so that after WW2, displaced persons fleeing the Iron Curtain were preemptively viewed as seeking freedom, just as the two million Iraqis currently petitioning for refugee status must be denied to bolster the illusion of progress there.”¹⁴³

Chapter 5: The Feedback Loop and The War On Terror

As we approach the War On Terror, the feedback loop becomes more apparent, and less hidden. The efforts by political elites to hide their animosity toward immigrants and refugees over the last twenty years has weakened. Attacks on immigrants, refugees and religious minorities are now welcomed in American politics.

The most recent manifestation of immigration law has yet to pass through Congress. The Cotton-Perdue Immigration Act of 2017 proposes limitations on immigration similar to those we see in the Emergency Quota Act of 1924, and the McCarran-Walter Act of 1954.

Like earlier immigration bills, the Cotton Perdue Immigration Act seeks to severely limit immigration, shrinking the number of people allowed to legally immigrate to nearly nothing. According to Ronald Brownstein, a writer for *The Atlantic* magazine, “The sponsors’ claim that the bill would increase skilled immigration is based almost entirely on the possibility that this point-based approach would admit more highly educated immigrants than the existing employer system.”¹⁴⁴ While this effort on its face seems legitimate, critics of the law, like Stuart Anderson, the executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy, say that the law would end immigration to the United States.¹⁴⁵

Currently immigration is nearly at a standstill. Visa application rejections have risen 37% between 2016 to 2018. Visa approvals are down 86% for nations covered by

the Muslim travel ban. Refugee resettlement has dropped 73.5% since 2016.¹⁴⁶

In the years preceding this decline, Ronald Brownstein writes that in 2016, the United States admitted nearly 1.2 million legal immigrants. Those who are sponsored by employers number about 140,000 annually; refugees and asylum seekers totalling 160,000; nearly 50,000 admitted through a diversity lottery; and about 800,000 relatives of American citizens and legal permanent residents.¹⁴⁷

In a nation of over 350 million, this represents less than one half of one percent of the population. Under the McCarran Walter Act, immigration was capped at 270,000 individuals. By current statistics, the immigration policy of the United States is more restrictive than at any other time in the history of immigration policy.

The end of the feedback loop suggests that there will be a rise in American nativism abroad. Knowledge of the history of this feedback loop may help to raise awareness of the cycle starting again. The domestic nativism currently dominates the political discourse, and may remain consistent until the next Presidential election cycle in 2020.

As this election approaches we may yet see an expression of American nativism abroad in order to bolster support for the president among his supporters. It has happened before, and history suggests that it works to influence elections. Therefore the value of an examination of the feedback loop lies in the lessons we derive.

The Purpose, Utility and Value of History

[America's] glory is not dominion, but liberty.
 Her march is the march of the mind.
 She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is,
 Freedom, Independence, Peace.

John Adams

Warning Against the Search for "Monsters to Destroy," 1821

One purpose of history is to make sense of the past. In the example of Vang Pao and the American Hmong, history has helped to illuminate how they arrived where they are, and the influence history continues to have over their current situation. The utility of history is that it allows us to use the sense of the past to comprehend the context of our present situation. The arrest of Vang Pao takes on a larger context when we consider his role as a refugee leader, a Cold Warrior and a tormented soul seeking to return to a land that no longer exists as he envisioned it. Understanding his role in the feedback loop helps us to understand a larger importance that his life represents.

Lastly, the value of history lies in its ability to help us to make choices about our future, based upon the sense of the past, and the context of the present. The arrest of Vang Pao and the feedback loop of nativist policy and war guides us to avoid continuing to create new refugee populations and to aid those who have already been created.

Today the United States is facing a refugee crisis originating in Latin America and the Middle East. Both waves of immigration may arguably originate in failed U.S. foreign policy in those regions. Understanding Vang Pao and his journey will help us to accommodate these new refugees and to prevent future refugee populations from being

created.

There is great promise and responsibility in the story of Vang Pao. Seeing the feedback loop of nativism in his experience can help to begin a dialogue about American identity that may address the damage being done even now, through the War on Terror and the debate over immigration.

Vang Pao represents a potential to address the mistakes of over a century of American nativism through war. The potential exists to end the terrible damage being done around the world by the United States as it attempts to define a world in binary terms of good and evil, America and other. If history can offer a lesson through the example of Vang Pao it would be to end the violence abroad so that no more Vang Pao examples are created in the future.

The responsibility of history then begins. Once we establish the acceptance of American nativism in creating refugees and destroying nations who chose to develop differently from the American conception of right and wrong, history calls upon America to act.

History would remind us of the words of one of the greatest Americans. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called upon us all to act in the name of righteousness. Knowledge that the United States is acting in ways antithetical to its ideals and potential stir all patriots to action. King said about Americans who love equality, “A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.”¹⁴⁸

Knowledge of the feedback loop of nativism calls upon all Americans to act for

that which is right; to act against war and for tolerance. The story of Vang Pao is evidence that students of history and lovers of America spread awareness of this insidious tradition, so as to prevent more damage being done.

General Vang Pao gave his life for a cause he believed in; the American cause. The lessons of his life are many, but none are more important than the lesson to not be silent on what matters. History guides us to change the course of the nation, to stop nativism, and to work for a future where refugees are allowed to live in safety, and the United States does not, as President John Adams famously said, "go abroad in search of monsters to destroy."¹⁴⁹

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