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ASIA & OCEANIA / Former Air America/CIA asset Vang Pao arrested

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CIA-assisted plot to overthrow Laos foiled Former Air America/CIA asset Vang Pao arrested



Larry Chin

Vang Pao, prominent Laotian exile leader and legendary CIA asset during the CIA's clandestine Indochinese wars of the 1960s and 1970s was among 10 men arrested on June 4, 2007, and accused of plotting a catastrophic military strike against the Laotian government using mercenary forces.



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According to US attorney Bob Twiss, the ten individuals are the plot leaders, but “thousands of co-conspirators remain at large, many in other countries.”



The other leading co-conspirator arrested was Harrison Ulrich Jack, a member of the California National Guard, and a retired Army officer who was a CIA covert operative in Southeast Asia before leaving active duty in 1977. According to the ATF agent, Jack quoted Lo Cha Thao, the president of the nonprofit organization United Hmong International, and one of the other Hmong co-conspirators, as saying that “the CIA was preparing to assist the Hmong insurgency once the takeover of Laos had begun”.

According to the San Francisco Chronicle report, “the complaint says Jack was hired as an arms broker and organizer by the other men because of his ‘contacts in the American defense, homeland security and defense contractor community”.

An arsenal, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, AK-47 machine guns, C-4 explosives, Claymore land mines, night-vision goggles, and other automatic weapons had already been purchased. The weapons, which were seized by undercover agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and Explosives (ATF), were to be used against military and civilian targets in Laos, including “an attack on the nation’s capital intended to reduce government targets to rubble, and make them look like the results of the attack upon the World Trade Center in New York on Sept. 11, 2001”, federal authorities said. The group had agents in the Laotian capital of Vientiane.



Vang Pao in the 1970's

Back to the future: General Vang Pao and Air America redux The return of Vang Pao (in any active political capacity whatsoever), and any CIA role whatsoever behind the aborted coup, is yet another ominous sign that the Bush administration is hellbent on imposing its geopolitical will, through criminal covert operations and manufactured holocausts, which include violent black operations in Asia that are not only reminiscent of the most brutal operations of the Vietnam War era, but far worse.

General Vang Pao, a CIA “cutout”, led a guerrilla army of CIA-backed Hmong tribesmen in the secret Laos proxy wars in the 1960s, and in the 1970s as a general in the Royal Army of Laos. When the US finally left Vietnam in 1975, Pao, with assistance from the American intelligence community, fled to the United States, with many of his associates in a mass exodus. The former general, 77, has been a resident of Orange County, California, but has reportedly “never given up the fight” to retake Laos. Pao heads various Hmong “liberation” groups, such as Neo Hom and the United Laotian Liberation Front, which have been recipients of money from Hmong expatriates and exiles, designated for guerrilla activities, and the eventual overthrow of the communist government in Laos.

The CIA’s Air America military/intelligence/narco-trafficking operation, and Vang Pao, are richly detailed in two definitive histories, Alfred McCoy’s *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the*

Global Drug Trade and Peter Dale Scott's Drugs, Oil and War: The United States in Afghanistan, Colombia and Indochina.

Air America was one of the most notorious of CIA proprietary airlines and a key component in the US government's notorious Golden Triangle heroin trafficking operations in the 1960s and 1970s. Air America began in 1950 as CAT (Civil Air Transport), and was the largest CIA proprietary in Asia. CAT itself was a proprietary with roots to the OSS-China and joint US-Kuomintang operations during World War II. According to Scott, "the CIA owned 40 percent of the company; the KMT bankers owned 60 percent. The planes had been supplying the KMT opium bases continuously since 1951.

The CIA, primarily through Air America, owned a monopoly over this traffic until 1960 (after which an expansion took place, behind many CIA proprietary fronts, including Air America, and, according to Scott "the opium-based economy of Laos continued to be protected by a coalition of opium-growing CIA mercenaries, Air America planes and Thai troops."). Air America was involved in various aspects of the Indochinese war and clandestine operations, including (but not limited to) narcotics trafficking, false flag operations, logistics, tactical support, troop (guerrilla) transport and defoliation.

Furthermore, Air America was not just a CIA front, but a complex apparatus with deep intelligence roots, as noted by Scott:

"Underlying Southeast Asian history in these years was the politically significant narcotics traffic. The CIA was intimately connected to this traffic, chiefly through its proprietary Air America. But it was not securely in control of this traffic and probably did not even seek to be. What it desired was 'deniability', achieved by the legal nicety that Air America, which the CIA wholly owned, was a corporation that hired pilots and owned an aircraft maintenance facility in Taiwan. Most of its planes, which often carried drugs, were 60 percent owned and frequently operated by Kuomintang (KMT) Chinese.

"The CIA was comfortable in this deniable relationship with people it knew were reorganizing the postwar drug traffic in Southeast Asia. The US government was determined to ensure that drug-trafficking networks and triads in the region remained under KMT control, even if this meant logistic and air support to armies in postwar Burma whose chief activity was expanding the local supply of opium. The complex legal structure of the airline CAT---known earlier as Civil Air Transport and later as Air America---was the ideal vehicle for this support."

“...Air America, whose managers overlapped with those of the CIA in one direction and Pan Am [the airline-LC] in another, was thrust into an escalating role in Laos that was contrary to US interests but supplied Pan Am with the needed military airlift business to survive in the Far East.

Scott also noted that Air America and its personnel “did contract work in Southeast Asia for the large oil companies, many of which maintain their own ‘intelligence’ networks recruited largely from veterans of the CIA”.

“Air America itself had a private stake in Southeast Asia’s burgeoning oil economy, for it flew ‘prospectors looking for copper and geologists searching for oil in Indonesia, and provided pilots for commercial airlines such as Air Vietnam and Thai Airways, and took over CAT’s passenger services.’

McCoy summarizes the Air America/Vang Pao relationship in the following excerpt [my emphasis in bold-LC]:

“The CIA ran a series of covert warfare operations along the China border that were instrumental in the creation of the Golden Triangle heroin complex...in Laos from 1960 to 1975, the CIA created a secret army of Hmong tribesmen to battle Laotian Communists near the border with North Vietnam. Since Hmong’s main cash crop was opium, the CIA adopted a complicitous posture toward the traffic, allowing the Hmong commander General Vang Pao, to use the CIA’s Air America to collect opium from his scattered highland villages. In late 1969, the CIA’s various covert action clients opened a network of heroin laboratories in the Golden Triangle. In their first years of operation, these laboratories exported high grade no. 4 heroin to US troops fighting in Vietnam. After their withdrawal, the Golden Triangle laboratories exported directly to the United States, capturing one-third of the American heroin market.”

Factoring in the military-intelligence aspect, Scott noted:

“In the 1960s, the largest of these operations was the supply of the fortified hilltop positions of the 45,000 Hmong tribesmen fighting against Pathet Lao behind their lines in northeast Laos...Air America’s planes also served to transport the Hmong’s main cash crop, opium.

“The Hmong units, originally organized and trained by the French, provided a good indigenous army for the Americans in Laos. Together with their CIA and US Special Forces ‘advisors’, the Hmong were used to harass Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese supply lines. In the later 1960s, they

engaged in conventional battles in which they were transported by Air America's planes and helicopters. The Hmong also defended, until its capture in 1968, the key US radar installation at Pathi near the North Vietnamese border; the station had been used in the bombing of North Vietnam....Farther south in Laos, Air America flew out of the CIA operations headquarters at Pakse...Originally the chief purpose of these activities was to observe and harass the Ho Chi Minh trail, but ultimately the fighting in the Laotian panhandle, as elsewhere in the country, expanded into a general air and ground war. Air America's planes were reported to be flying arms, supplies and reinforcements into this larger campaign as well."



Vang Pao: a decorated murderer

Vang Pao: CIA murderer Vang Pao was not only a CIA favorite, but a ruthless killer. McCoy wrote:

"With his flair for such cost-effective combat, Vang Pao would become a hero to agency bureaucrats in Washington. 'CIA had identified an officer...originally trained by the French, who had not only the courage but also the political acumen...for leadership in such a conflict...', recalled retired CIA director William Colby. 'His name was Vang Pao, and he had the enthusiastic admiration of the CIA officers, who knew him...as a man who... knew how to say no as well as yes to Americans.' Many CIA field operatives admired his ruthlessness. When agent Thomas Clines, commander of the CIA's secret base at Long Tieng, demanded an immediate interrogation of six prisoners, Vang Pao ordered them executed on the spot. Clines was impressed." [Clines was both a legendary CIA operative and a lifelong friend and political associate of the Bush family.—LC]

“For ‘several years’”, according to Scott, “seven hundred members of the ‘civilian’ USAID mission (working out of the mission’s ‘rural development annex’ had been former Special Forces and US Army servicemen responsible to the CIA station chief and working in northeast Laos with CIA-supported Hmong guerrillas of General Vang Pao. Vang Pao’s Armee Clandestine was not even answerable to the Royal Lao government or the army, being entirely financed and supported by the CIA.”

“(Hmong commander) Touby Lyfoung had once remarked of Vang Pao, ‘He is a pure military officer who doesn’t understand that after the war there is peace. And one must be strong to win the peace.’”

It appears that today, decades later, the general still does not understand the need for peace.

Towards new warfare and instability in Asia In addition to questions about the return of Golden Triangle/CIA cutout Vang Pao, this development raises new and disturbing questions about the Bush administration’s Pacific-Southeast Asia geostrategy.

Initial reports suggest that this aborted coup was not simply a rogue operation, but one that was supported by CIA and other US agencies, and US defense contractors. Who would have benefited from this pure Cold War/Vietnam War-era insurrection and coup? What interests would have been served by a 9/11-type catastrophe in Vientiane, and the installation of a regime headed by CIA-supported military-intelligence figures and narco-trafficking expatriates?

Does the agenda involve Golden Triangle narco-trafficking, and new attempts to revitalize or restructure heroin traffic, and laundered funds into a fragile world economy?

Does the control of oil and oil transport routes, a perennial US objective in Southeast Asia, play a role? How about the “war on terrorism”? Southeast Asia has been the target of numerous real and fabricated “terror” operations (such as the bombing of Bali). A major event in Laos would have triggered similar political effects.

Then there is the larger agenda aimed at containing or competing with nearby China---a return to the same confrontational politics of the Cold War era. In *Drugs, Oil, and War*, Scott wrote that the CIA’s role in deliberately fomenting conflict in Laos in the 1960s may have been aimed at provoking a war with China, and polarizing the various factions. “What made the Pentagon, CIA and Air America hang on in Laos with such tenacity? ...at least as late as 1962, there were those in

the Pentagon and the CIA ‘who believed that a direct confrontation with Communist China was inevitable’” and the expectation that “Laos was sooner or later to become a major battleground in a military sense between the East and the West”. The aim, according to Scott, “was achieved” the country became a battlefield where U.S. bombings, with between four hundred and five hundred sorties a day in 1970, generated 600,000 refugees.”

Is the US looking to create a similar conflict again, this time against a new emerging Chinese superpower threat?



Vang Pao unveiling the Lao-Hmong American War Memorial Monument in Fresno, California, in December 2005. This 5 m high and 14 tons bronze and marble monument represents Lao and Hmong soldiers rescuing a US pilot...

“Vietnam, in other words, was not an isolated event”, as emphasized by Scott. “It was the product of ongoing war-creating energies located chiefly in this country, which to this day have not yet been properly identified and countered. Of these forces, none is deeper and more mysterious than the involvement yet again of the CIA, and airlines working for it, with major drug traffickers...Such forces will continue to haunt us until they are better understood.”

While the details of this case continue to be revealed, what is abundantly clear and obvious is that the CIA’s many criminal operations, directly authorized and/or tacitly endorsed by a Bush administration, continue to intensify, in every corner of the world.

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