

June 13, 1980

Hon. Matthew F. McHugh (D-NY)
Cannon HOB
Washington DC.

Dear Congressman McHugh,

We have corresponded in the past about the Hmong peoples of Laos, after an article I wrote for the Washington Post in September 1978. In that article and on other occasions, I have stood up for the rights of the Hmong, in view of their past associations with us in Indochina.

The earlier Hmong refugees who came to the United States rapidly earned a reputation for hard work and ambition, and I have noted this in my comments on the subject in the past. I regret to state now, however, that they are doing much worse here, and wish to pass on to you for your information some of the reports that have come to me. It appears that substantial elements of the Hmong refugees have retained their tightly knit tribal organization and take direction from their former leader, Gen. Vang Pao. Some time ago, he promulgated the idea that the Hmong should not take the immediate entry-level jobs they used to accept, but should rather go deliberately on relief. The initial rationale was that this would enable them to study full-time and acquire skills which would permit them to enter the job market later at higher technical levels, thus escaping the entry-level trap. This appeared to make a considerable amount of Macchiavellian sense, another example of the Hmong's intelligence and adaptability. Unfortunately, the scheme seems to have gone sour.

I am informed that Vang Pao is now, in effect, discouraging the Hmong from putting down long-term roots here, telling them that they will all be returning to the hills of Laos under his command to reconquer their homelands. His instructions have apparently also penetrated to the camps in Thailand, where numbers of Hmong admitted to U.S. immigration have turned down the opportunity because Vang Pao has told them that he will be returning in the next two or three months to lead them back into Laos, with "big-power support." In short, it seems that the Hmong are being tragically misled by Vang Pao, to the detriment of their previously excellent adaptation to their new life in the U.S.

Another negative factor is that, whereas the earlier refugees tended to have job skills and some English language capability by virtue of closer association with Americans in Laos, the newer arrivals have tended more to lack such skills and therefore adapt less easily to life here. Trouble may be brewing in the Twin Cities area since it is rumored that several thousand Hmong from California are planning to move there, specifically to take advantage of more favorable welfare programs, and again under the guidance of Vang Pao. With the top tribal leader encouraging his people not to take their place in American life, we obviously have a problem.

