

1 March 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Meo Memo

Attached, per your request, are my comments and recommendations on the Meo memo plus my suggested editorial changes. After some reflection, I decided the best and fairest thing to do would be to show my comments and proposed changes to Dick Lehman so that he would at least know what I was recommending to you with respect to this piece on which his office has labored so long. Dick's remarks are attached below. I agree with his first point and have already made the change. I disagree with his second point, since I regard the sentence as speculative and unhelpful. I also disagree with his third point though paragraph 77 bothers me somewhat less than paragraphs 78, 79, and 80.


George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

25X1

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Carver

Herewith your annotated copy of the memo. I have a couple of problems.

1. Top of page 18. We have not mentioned the Agency specifically anywhere else in the memo and I would suggest to delete here.

2. Page 32, last sentence of paragraph 73. This seems to me a useful thought and I think it should be retained.

3. Your proposal to drop paras 77-80. I could readily sacrifice 79 and 80 and reluctantly 78, but I think 77 should remain, if only to summarize the problem.

RL
RICHARD LEHMAN

(DATE)

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Approved For Release 2004/10/28 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000700060059-1

1 March 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Comments on "The Meo of Northeast Laos: The Waning of a Tribe"

25X1 1. Per your 28 February request, I have read the latest (28 February) version of the Meo memo with great care. As you know, an earlier draft was telepouched to the field for comment by [redacted] and the Vientiane Station. This latest version reflects the field comments and corrections. I have discussed this latest version with [redacted] who shares my thoughts as outlined below.

25X1 2. The Meo memo is a first-class, very impressive piece of research, analysis and writing. As all who have read it (both here and overseas) have noted, it does great credit to those who put it together -- especially [redacted] its principal drafter, who drew on a lot of good work done by the Vietnamese Station. The question before the house, however, is not the quality of the paper as a piece of analysis (undisputably excellent) but whether it should be disseminated externally as an Agency memorandum and, if so, to whom and under what controls.

3. Laos, as you well know, is a complex topic on which there is a wide spectrum of strongly held views within and, particularly, outside the U.S. Government. The Agency's role in Laos is a topic of special complexity and controversy. It is clearly our duty to do what we can to enlighten the policy levels of the U.S. Government on important matters of major policy concern. It is not our duty, however, to cut our own throat or hand our critics sharp instruments to facilitate their doing so. Also -- a fact of life that cannot here be ignored -- the practical likelihood of controversial official documents on Indochina leaking, especially ones relating to Agency activities, has to be recognized as very high at the present time. Hence, we have to be particularly careful about publishing documents with passages or material that could be used as ammunition in an attack on the U.S. Government, its Indochina policies, or the Agency's role therein.

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4. The above considerations are germane to your decision on dissemination of the Meo memo because it perforce treats two particularly controversial and highly charged matters:

- a. The Meo's traditional role as growers of poppies and producers of opium as their major cash crop.
- b. A key cause/effect argument on whether (1) U.S. (Agency)-backed military operations in north Laos were necessitated by aggressive Communist pressure directed and increasingly supported from Hanoi or (2) these operations were not necessary and, in fact, prompted or stimulated Hanoi's energetic intervention thus, in effect, causing the Meo to be destroyed as a people.

5. I urge you to read the memo carefully yourself and make your own judgments. As you will note, I have made a number of editorial suggestions. These have two objects:

- a. To tailor the prose on the opium question to avoid statements against interest, without masking facts or tampering with the truth. It is clearly not in our interest to publish an official Agency document containing prose that in or out of context could be used to support the charge that we have been directly or indirectly subsidizing the production of or traffic in opium.
- b. To adjust statements on the causality issue in order, again, to avoid comments clearly against interest but (I hope) without doing violence to the author's basic arguments and judgments.

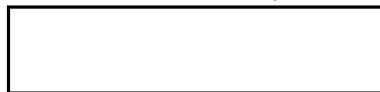
6. In addition to the editorial fixes offered for your consideration, there are four paragraphs -- 77, 78, 79, and 80 -- that I simply do not agree with and think should be dropped. I may be wrong -- and am sure the memo's able author would argue that I am -- but these paragraphs contain a line of analysis I personally do not buy. Basically, I think these paragraphs ignore certain essential factors to a degree that makes them unrealistic. Rather than belaboring the point here,

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however, I will not make further oral or written argument for them should you desire it.

7. My net recommendation is that with editorial fixes along the lines suggested, the memorandum should be given limited dissemination to -- and only to -- Dr. Kissinger, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, and Mr. Sullivan. It should go out with a cover note personally signed by you that stresses the memo's political sensitivity. If handled this way, I think it will make a helpful contribution and do the Agency credit. If it is given any wider dissemination, however, it is almost certain to reach hostile hands in the press or Congress and be used as a source of ammunition against the Government and the Agency.



George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

25X1

31 March 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: SAVA

SUBJECT : Meo

25X1 1. [] C/FE, successfully argued me out of my original reaction to this memorandum on the Meo (see attached draft memorandum to Mr. Walsh). I was not aware of the degree of review the memo has had. I have not signed it and will not.

2. I agree with the thought that we are basically differing on a chicken-and-egg proposition. The one thing I can comment on with certainty is U.S. motivation in 1962, as I was a major participant in it. Governor Harriman, then Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern matters, had to be convinced to continue any assistance at all to the Meo. The sole basis upon which he agreed was that we could not just turn away and leave them to the mercies of the North Vietnamese. We had no desire to move ahead and conduct paramilitary operations in that area until after the North Vietnamese had demonstrated their contempt for the 1962 Geneva Agreements.

3. I certainly don't want to varnish a sad story. I do believe, however, that we have nothing to be ashamed of in our support of the Meo. Freedom and independence are well worth the costs they involve, not only to the U.S. but also in this case to the Meo. Thus I have real trouble with the last sentence of [] memo, and correspondingly with a bit of the tone of the basic DDI memo.

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W. E. Colby

Executive Director-Comptroller

Attachment
As stated

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72-1727

29 March 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: Executive Director-Comptroller

SUBJECT: Intelligence Memorandum No. 0844/72
"The Meo of Northeast Laos: The
Waning of a Tribe"

25X1 1. Some background on the work which has been done on the paper might be useful. When the first draft was sent to us we had some problems with it which eventually resulted in its being sent to the Field for careful review by both the Vientiane Station and those officers who were most intimately familiar with our early involvement with the Meo. The draft was gone over by [redacted] [redacted] all of whom made minor corrections, but none of whom objected to the basic interpretations in the paper. The Vientiane Station management said they had no problems with it. At the time all this was going on, George Carver and I suggested to the Director that we hold off on distribution of the paper until we had the Field comments and that distribution be carefully limited inasmuch as we obviously had a document which had political overtones. The Director agreed. After the return of the paper, it was subsequently further revised by George Carver to eliminate objectionable phrasing. In short, a great deal of work has been done on this paper by a number of knowledgeable people who do not object to the final outcome.

2. Perhaps if we had written the paper we would have adopted a somewhat different tone. The question of tone really boils down to whether the Meo originally sought our assistance and therefore we were involved in supporting them in their battle with the North Vietnamese or whether we encouraged them to accept our assistance for our own purposes which is essentially the argument in this paper. This is something of a chicken and egg proposition, but from our reading of the record what the U. S. found in the Meo was an anti-North Vietnamese element (they had been chased out of North Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army)

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which we supported initially for intelligence purposes and later because they represented an element of anti-Communist strength in the Laos equation. The Kennedy Administration authorized us to support the Meo prior to the Geneva Accords for the specific purpose of harassing the communist and neutralist forces then on the Plain of Jars. This was to be a diversionary or supplemental effort to the plans of the U. S. to support the Royal Lao Army's efforts to march north and retake the Plain. Thus I have no particular problem with the page 1 comment.

3. With regard to your comment in paragraph 3 b, certainly the North Vietnamese and specifically the Lao Dong Party, were directing the Pathet Lao forces and providing them with advisory and logistics support. But until 1967, the activities of the Meo were not particularly troublesome to North Vietnamese interests in the area. With the expansion of our program of support of the Meo in 1967 and 68 and the establishment of a Tacan site at Phou Pha Thi near Sam Neua, plus an increase in Meo harassment activity, the North Vietnamese apparently decided to up the ante and take over the fight against the Meo in north Laos with regular North Vietnamese units.

4. Compared to their position in 1967, the Meo have lost heavily in territory. Although they have been able to get back on the Plain of Jars during the wet season the fact is that they have lost almost all the territory they held in Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang provinces. The paragraph in question seems reasonably accurate to us. The Meo have lost territory and been turned largely into a nation of refugees. The real argument is whether this would have happened anyhow had we not involved ourselves with them.

5. Re the top of page 10, I don't agree that the U. S. motivation in 1962 was primarily one of not walking away and leaving the Meo to their own devices in the face of the North Vietnamese as we had up to that point been playing the Meo as a supporting force to other efforts to preserve the Royal Lao Government. With the signing of the Geneva Accords which

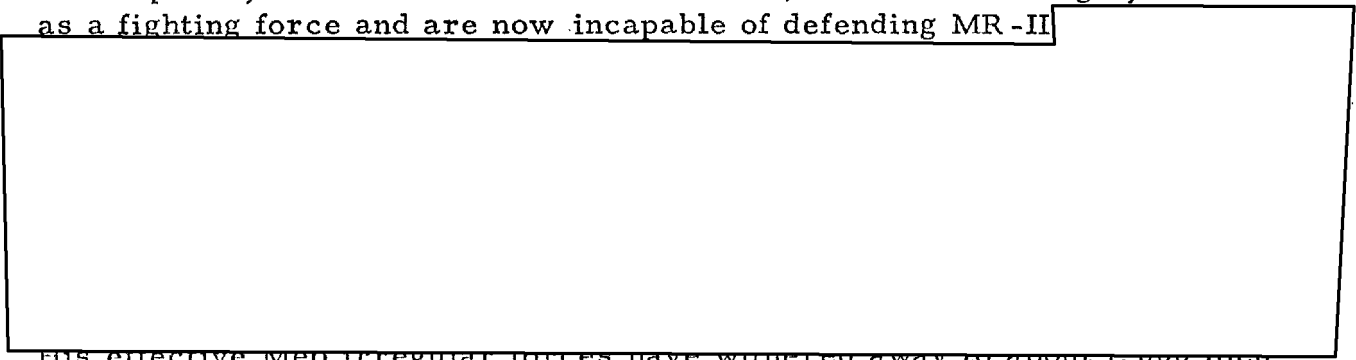
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forced the withdrawal of the MAAG, our capability to covertly continue support of the Meo became a key element in resisting PL/NVA advances against the neutralist and rightist forces in Laos. I doubt very much that we were motivated by any overwhelming feeling of obligation to the Meo forces.

6. Re paragraph 27, this is part of the chicken and egg argument but I believe it is obviously true that had the Meo fight not been of interest in Washington we would not have supplied them with the wherewithal to continue the fight.

25X1 7. Re paragraph 50, it is certainly true that the North Vietnamese have expended a great deal of energy and effort in their campaigns against the Meo particularly since 1968. They have underestimated the resiliency of the Meo and have never been able to devote the effort and force needed to completely eliminate them. Nevertheless, the Meo are largely finished as a fighting force and are now incapable of defending MR-II



His effective Meo irregular forces have winnowed away to about 1,000 men who are sitting up north of Xieng Khouangville doing very little. The strength figures on Meo armed forces are grossly inflated.

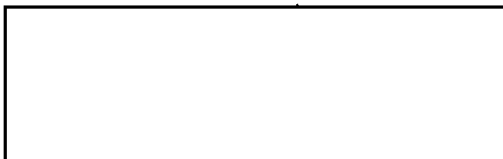
8. If we had not involved ourselves in support of the Meo it is probable that they would largely have been left to their mountain ways by the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese who would have certainly attempted to control them politically, but who might well have settled for a tacit live and let live policy with occasional skirmishes to keep them from encroaching too much on their lines of communication.

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Certainly the war would have affected them but probably would not have created the large refugee population which now exists.

9. On balance, we feel that the Meo paper is a reasonably honest and accurate presentation of the situation. It might have been presented in a somewhat more positive fashion but to do so would be a questionable attempt to varnish what is an essentially sad story. I am unable to bring myself to feel that the Meo would be necessarily much worse off had we left them alone.



Chief, Far East Division

Attachment:
Your Memo of 27 March,
Same Subject

25X1

27 March 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR : Mr. Paul V. Walsh
Assistant Deputy Director for Intelligence

SUBJECT : Intelligence Memorandum No. 0844/72
"The Meo of Northeast Laos: The Waning
of a Tribe"

1. May I commend the initiative in writing the attached review of the Meo and their present prospects.

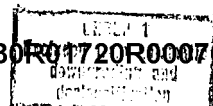
2. This being said, I have real trouble with some of the contents. Perhaps it is chiefly the Introduction (and summary) which set me off, but I do feel it represents an example of the argument that U. S. aid and involvement with another people is a two-part equation leading to a negative result. I always thought there was another factor in the equation, i. e., the enemy, and that U. S. involvement was the result of that factor rather than an independent action.

3. Some specifics:

a. I question whether the Meo "provided the U. S. with a means of monitoring and harassing the Communists", (Page 1). Rather, I think the United States provided assistance to the Meo fighting the Communists' efforts against them. Our monitoring was something that we could have done with considerably less effort, and the harassing took place only when the Communists came into the Meo country.

b. I would call North Vietnamese involvement in North Laos somewhat more than "limited to advisory and logistic support for the indigenous Communist forces and periodic dry-season appearances by elements of the North Vietnamese 316th Division." (Page 1). I think the North Vietnamese were manipulating and operating the operation to a much higher degree, and their degree of frustration with their puppet Pathet Lao must have been monumental, to say the least.

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c. Since early 1968 the Communists have not "steadily rolled back the territorial gains of the Meo." (Page 2). You mention later in the paper the very substantial reverse movement of the Meo into the Plaines des Jarres in 1969. The key characteristic of the war in northern Laos has been the seasonal ebb and flow. You say the last two dry seasons ended with the North Vietnamese menacing Long Tieng. True, but we could also say that the last two wet seasons have ended with the Meo a considerable distance into Communist territory.

d. As for the alternatives in your penultimate paragraph of the Introduction, I would add somewhat more specifically the points you make later in the paper that the Meo also have another option -- inclusion in an over-all negotiated settlement in Indochina, which we of course have been trying to achieve for many years.

4. Other points:

a. Page 4 - para 5- "Many" young Meo have not become highly effective fighter pilots in a matter of months. Some have, which is pretty amazing in itself, but we need not overdo it.

b. I got a little lost in the contrast between paragraphs 6 and 7.

c. Top of page 10. The U.S. motivation in 1962 was primarily one of not walking away and leaving the Meo to their own devices in the face of the North Vietnamese. Also, we flew in nonmilitary supplies until the North Vietnamese began their attacks there.

d. Para 27. Again, I rather question the degree to which the Meo were "successfully serving the interests of Vientiane and Washington," as against the degree Washington was helping them do something they wanted to do, i. e., resist the North Vietnamese.

5. Para 50 on page 16 is an example of my difficulty. I wonder what the author in Hanoi or Peking might write. It might come to something like:

- 3 -

"The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao have spent enormous amounts of blood and treasure to try to overcome the infuriating Meo and the support they have received from the Americans over the years. Starting with the use of Pathet Lao elements, guided and stiffened by North Vietnamese, a series of attempts to conquer these people were made. This has included the work of a regular North Vietnamese division and, in 1969, two regular North Vietnamese divisions. Despite this effort, the Meo have managed to retake a large amount of territory the North Vietnamese have taken. Each year the question boils down to the long-term determination of the Meo to maintain themselves (with U.S. assistance, [redacted]) [redacted] as against the long-term determination of the North Vietnamese to suppress them. At this juncture, despite the fact that the Meo have real troubles, the long-term profit in the exercise to the North Vietnamese does not seem at all clear. If it is not successful in 1972, and it must be realized that it is badly off schedule and still has not been able to make a decisive capture of Long Tieng (despite the fact that it was announced as taken in January), there is some question whether the continued effort is worth the candle. Perhaps it would be better to settle for a buffer zone of Sam Neua and the area around Route 7 and leave Xieng Khouang Province to this irritating bunch of people, so long as the Americans or the Vietnamese would not use the area as a base of operations against North Vietnam."

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6. The discussion of the change in mores (paras 59-63) is an example of the acceleration of development which war brings to primitive peoples. It will be recalled that somewhat the same experience was suffered by a number of the South Pacific peoples from 1942 to 1945. This made major temporary changes in a number of these areas, but they seem to have survived. As for the chances that the frustration can lead to a return to the old leadership, it seems much more likely that dissatisfaction, if it is such, with Vang Pao could lead to another type of military leader as long as the war threat persists.

7. Page 23, para 69. I really question that Vang Pao ever really promised them that "all will be well."

- 4 -

8. The discussion from paragraphs 73 to 81 bothers me. Such fuzzy estimative language as, "They may begin to question," "The Meo may well wonder," "There is no firm evidence that ... But," "Another possibility is," and "They might try." leaves an impression but is hardly definitive.

9. Pardon my nitpicks. What I really am expressing is a concern as to the tone of the paper. I stand second to none in my appreciation of the enormous cost the Meo have suffered and my sympathy for them. At the same time, I have been much impressed by their courage and tenacity and would hope that no assessment of ours would shortchange them on the basis of how they ought to react rather than how these magnificent people have reacted. At the same time, I repeat my full concurrence with the desirability of a full assessment and recording of this experience, including all the negative factors and uncertainties. I just wonder whether this paper gives adequate recognition to the intangibles which these people have shown over the years.

W. E. Colby
Executive Director-Comptroller