

By Conn Hallinan

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Cynicism, as the late Molly Ivins once noted, is the death of good journalism, but reading through the *New York Times* and the Associated Press' obituaries of Laotian-Hmong leader General Vang Pao made that sentiment a difficult one to resist.

Vang Pao, who died Jan. 6 in Clovis, a small town in California's Central Valley, was described in the *Times* as "charismatic" and in AP as a "fabled military hero" who led a Hmong army against the communist Pathet Lao during the Laotian civil war. Van Pao's so-called "secret army" was financed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency as part of the U.S.'s war against North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam.

Well, "financed" is a slippery word, and while, it was true Vang Pao got a lots of money and arms from the CIA, a major source of his financing was the opium trade run out of Southeast Asia's "Golden Triangle." That little piece of history never managed to make it into the obits, which is hardly a surprise. The people the CIA hired to run dope for Vang Pao went on to run dope for the Contras in the Reagan Administration's war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. And talking about close ties between drugs and the CIA in Southeast Asia and Central America might lead to some very uncomfortable questions about the people we are currently supporting in Afghanistan.

Readers should search out a book by Alfred McCoy called "The Politics of Heroin in South East Asia," and pull up a *Frontline* piece entitled "[Drugs, Guns and the CIA](#)" by Andrew and Leslie Cockburn. What they will find is not in the *Times* and the AP obits.

A major source for the *Frontline* piece was Ron Rickenback, who headed up the U.S. Aid and Development Program (USAID) in Laos. Rickenback says he witnessed drugs being transported from outlying areas in Laos aboard U.S. Air America aircraft, which was then put on

larger aircraft for shipment to southern Laos and Thailand. Air America was on contract with the CIA.

Rickenback says the CIA knew drugs were being run on their airplanes, but that the drug trade helped finance the war against the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese. To cover their tracks, the CIA took an Air America C-47, painted it, named it Sing Quan Airlines, and gave it to Van Pao. Sing Quan quickly became known as "Opium Air."

Frontline also tracked down several pilots that flew Sing Quan and Air America planes (some of them were in jail for running cocaine out of Central America), who confirmed that opium was a major part of their cargo. Journalist John Everingham's investigation also linked Vang Pao to the opium trade.

Leslie Cockburn also managed to land an interview with Tony Poe, the CIA's key man in Laos and the model for the out-of-control CIA agent in *Apocalypse Now*. Poe, who was driven out of the Agency when he refused to go along with the dope dealing, confirmed Van Pao's central role in drug running.

The trade in opium and heroin in Laos was linked in turn to the U.S.-supported regime in South Vietnam led by President Nguyen Van Thieu. Much of that heroin ended up in the bodies of American GIs—during the height of the war there were between two and three fatal overdoses a day—as well as decimating neighborhoods back in the U.S.

The history of drugs and U.S. foreign policy is a long and dark one. At the end of World War II, the Agency made common cause with the Corsican Brotherhood and La Cosa Nostra to drive the Left out of the Port of Marseilles. Drug running was a major source of money for the two Italian criminal organizations.

The same people who ran the CIA's drug operation in Southeast Asia turned up running drugs and guns for the rightwing Contras in the 1980s Nicaraguan civil war. Cocaine money was used to buy weapons and supplies for the Contras, with anti-Castro Cubans acting as organizers and middlemen.

And lest we think this is all ancient history, maybe Congress should take a close look at our current allies in Afghanistan: the Karzai government and the Northern Alliance.

First, a few facts.

The United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crimes estimates that the Afghan opium trade generates about \$3.4 billion a year, of which about 4 percent goes as taxes to the Taliban. There is some dispute over how much cash this represents: the UN says \$125 million a year; U.S. intelligence agencies estimate \$70 million a year. Some 21 percent goes to the farmers. What happens to the 75 percent left over?

According to Julian Mercille, a lecturer at University College, Dublin, the bulk "is captured by government officials, the police, local and regional power brokers and traffickers." This includes President Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, and Northern Alliance general, Nazri Mahmad.

Mercille argues that the U.S. has an "historical pattern of toleration and empowerment of local drug lords in [its] pursuit of broader foreign policy goals."

The pattern—established after the Second World War in Europe, and then later in Southeast Asia and Latin America—is that drugs are a handy way to generate lots of off-the-books money, and an easy way to buy loyalty. It is also good business. That UN report also found that between 90 to 95 percent of illegal opium sales over the past several years—some \$400 to \$500 billion—were laundered through western banks. Part of that money ended up being used to keep some of those banks from going under during the recent economic meltdown.

What these policies leave in their wake are ruin and destruction. Over 35,000 members of Vang Pao's army were killed fighting a losing war with the Pathet Lao, and some 200,000 Hmong were re-settled in the U.S., mainly in Minnesota, Wisconsin and California. Nicaragua is still trying to recover from the Contra War, and Afghanistan has turned into a bleeding ulcer.

Vang Pao was a pawn, first of the French, in whose colonial army he served, and later of the

U.S. In the global chess game called the Cold War, he and his people were disposable. So were the Nicaraguans, and so are the Afghans. The dead are at peace; the living should remember, and the media should help preserve, not obscure, those memories.