CHAPTER TWO

A Real Country?

*Denationalizing the Lao Uplands, 1955–1975*

We live in a revolutionary world in which internal war is a basic fact of life. . . . Studies of the techniques by which internal wars can be molded and channeled are therefore of the utmost importance. The Machiavellian overtones, the apparent cynicism, may make such studies repellent, but that cannot be helped.

—from *Social Science Research and National Security*, a 1963 report by the Research Group in Psychology and the Social Sciences, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, for the US Office of Naval Research

In 1971, as part of its ongoing efforts to advise the US military on Cold War strategy, the RAND Corporation hired a man named Douglas Blaufarb to chronicle the lessons of the “unconventional” war the United States had been fighting in Laos since 1962. Blaufarb had been the Vientiane station chief for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 1964 to 1966, and would later write an authoritative insider account of US Cold War counterinsurgency efforts across the global South. His report combined big-picture strategy with cool technical precision, and argued that the “quiet war” the United States had been fighting in Laos had “largely achieved its aim.” Declassified in 1997, it makes for chilling reading.

Central to Blaufarb’s analysis is his account of a shift that took place in 1960–61 among key American policymakers and advisers, as the outgoing Eisenhower and incoming Kennedy administrations confronted
what came to be called “the Laotian crisis.” The shift concerned the ontological status of the political-geographic entity, Laos, that the Americans were dealing with. In the years leading up to the so-called crisis, US engagement there had aimed to make Laos what Blaufarb called “a firm anti-Communist ‘bastion’ on the borders of China and Vietnam,” and had focused largely on the urban milieu of Vientiane. But as US frustration with electoral and coalition politics grew, the Americans began to rethink what Laos actually was. The premise of creating a strong “bastion” had presumed that Laos was an actual country, ontologically the same as the others that surrounded it: Vietnam, China, Thailand, and so on. But as Blaufar’s account reveals, the Laotian crisis was not just an outward political crisis, a series of events centered on a 1960 coup by a Neutralist army captain who leaned distinctly away from US interests. It was also an internal, analytical crisis among US strategists and their advisers, who began to suspect that Laos was not what they had previously thought. Increasingly, they began to doubt whether it was a real country at all.

Blaufarb’s opening pages describe Laos as “hardly a country except in the legal sense,” and his subsequent elaboration reflects the opinion of the various policymakers, advisers, and clandestine operatives he worked with:

History and terrain have divided the land into separate regions, with little to bind these together. The population is a mixture of races and religions, of primitive hill tribes and lowland paddy-growing Lao peasants, who regard each other with fear and hostility. Although in control of the government and its military forces, the ethnic Lao comprise less than half the population. The elite of this Lao minority is a collection of rival clans, who share little in the sense of national purpose but regard the government and the public service as an arena where they compete for influence and power to enrich themselves. The country as a whole is underdeveloped in every way. A limited road network connects the main towns along the Mekong [River] but, with few exceptions, avoids the hinterland, a rugged, roadless expanse of jungled hills and limestone ridges.

Today, similar discourses of national unreality permeate global geopolitics in “fracture zones” across the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, where discourses of “tribalism” and “rival clans” are regularly invoked to explain ongoing political crises from Iraq to Sudan to Afghanistan, among others. These explanations are, of course, highly selective,
leaving out the trajectories of foreign intervention that, like the 1963 report quoted in the epigraph above, reflect the premise held by some state officials and their so-called expert advisers, both then and now, that molding and channeling the “internal wars” of other countries is something to be embraced and undertaken, however reluctantly.

While no longer riven by the “unconventional” conflict that Blaufarb summarized fairly accurately as “a civil-war-cum-foreign-invasion,” Laos still bears the scars of the days when it was the Afghanistan of its time. These scars are partly physical; Laos’s status as the most-bombed nation on earth is rarely far from popular accounts of the country. But the legacies are also socio-geographic in the sense described in this chapter, which focuses on the upland landscape. Laos’s uplands—today a target of many development projects, including but hardly limited to the transnational land deals discussed in the last chapter—cannot be understood merely in the biophysical and human-ecological terms usually used: a mountainous region where population and road densities are thin, where forests are historically abundant, and where shifting cultivation has long been a dominant form of agricultural production. The uplands are also a political landscape where questions of governance, resistance, and security are rarely far from the surface, even if their depths are, as elaborated in later chapters, highly variable and often hard to see. If, as James Scott argues, upland Southeast Asia is today a key site of the ongoing “last great enclosure” through which modern states “climb hills,” the unevenness of this process should not be underestimated. The Cold War history of Laos’s uplands—both in general and in the northwest in particular—has shaped this unevenness significantly. In the northwest, this history revolves around a place called Nam Nyu.

Nam Nyu was the site of a clandestine military and spy base run by the CIA from 1962 to 1973 in what is today the remote hinterland of the Northern Economic Corridor. While now relatively a nondescript, rural corner of Laos’s Bokeo province, until the mid-2000s Nam Nyu was one of a handful of military “special zones” that dotted the uplands of northern Laos and reflected the legacy of events discussed in this chapter and the next. At 600 square kilometers, the Nam Nyu special zone was comparatively small, at least relative to the larger and better-known Saysomboun special zone, a 7,000-square-kilometer area formerly located in north-central Laos that makes an appearance in chapter 3. (Saysomboun is now a province of its own, while the Nam Nyu special zone has been absorbed into the surrounding districts.) But even at 600 square kilometers—60,000 hectares in the units used in chapter 1—the special zone that was created in the wake of Nam
Nyu’s destruction in 1973 testifies to the ease with which postwar events overspill earlier boundaries. This overspilling was substantial.

In Laos, Cold War–era logic and practices sought to create a form of upland political space that was explicitly, deliberately, and strategically denationalized. Today, we often associate territorialization efforts with processes of integration, whether for nation-building, regionalization, or both—the NEC, for example.14 Here, in contrast, territorialization focused on exacerbating the disconnectedness and internal fracturing that, as in Blaufarb’s description quoted above, US strategists increasingly associated with Laos after around 1960. The geography of infrastructure specific to this form of territoriality was not roads, but roadlessness supported by small aircraft, and the sociopolitical space it thus strove to create was one of remoteness, isolation, and autonomy for the upland “hill tribes” that the CIA and their collaborators worked with. This embrace of the uplands, and of upland peoples as political allies and “assets” (in the blunt language of Cold War espionage), was a direct response to the Laotian crisis of 1960–61, and it drew for inspiration on French military efforts of the 1950s to pit upland communities against the nationalist Viet Minh. But it was also a response rooted in multiple decades of French colonialism, in both its logics and its shortcomings. For most of their rule the French never imagined Laos as a distinct nation, seeing it instead as an underpopulated and racially inferior borderland whose “ordained role” would be, as historian Martin Stuart-Fox explains, eventually being absorbed into “a greater Vietnam.”15 But systematic underinvestment by the French made this incorporation a slow process, and the fragmentation that formed the basis of the US turn to the uplands was as much an effect of colonial neglect as it was of explicit policy.

The US reorientation away from the Lao urban milieu was enormous, both at the time and in terms of its enduring legacies. The most well-known of these was, as mentioned above, the unacknowledged air war that, between 1964 and 1973, gave Laos the unhappy distinction of being one of the most bombed countries of the twentieth century.16 But the shift to treating Laos not as a nation per se but as a postcolonial terrain, to be understood and exploited militarily in the context of the wider Cold War in East and Southeast Asia, also dug deeply into what twenty-first-century military strategists have come to call the human terrain.17 In the process, cold warriors like Blaufarb and others who appear below rearranged sociopolitical relationships within and across upland Laos in ways that would have long-lasting impact.18 Given the emphasis on the “denationalization” of territory that has come to characterize scholarly understandings of transnational land access today,19 earlier histories of territorial denationalization—especially where they
underlie and influence later processes of land grabbing—are essential to bring into the picture.

EMBRACING THE UPLANDS

Most Americans had never heard of Laos before the so-called “Laotian crisis,” which confronted the newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy in the winter and spring of 1961. Over those months, Kennedy learned to pronounce the name of an unfamiliar country (“Lay-oss” in February, “Laos” by April) and adopted his predecessors’ domino theory of Southeast Asian geopolitics. “If Laos fell into communist hands,” Kennedy fretted, “it would increase the dangers on the northern frontiers of Thailand, would put additional pressure on Cambodia, and would put additional pressure on South Vietnam, which themselves would put additional pressure on Malaya.”

These sorts of worries, at once hemispheric in their perceived importance and yet also intensely local, tasked American policymakers in new ways during the Cold War and led them to rethink assumptions and come up with new methods that were at once inventive, difficult to categorize, and tragic for many of those they entangled. The desire to create replacements for traditional military engagement—to wage wars that were not quite wars, yet were at the same time “politics by other means”—had pushed the US military to develop its social-scientific capacities in new ways after the Second World War. Engaging some of the brightest minds of the day, the challenge of manipulating “internal wars” in other countries found fruition in early-1960s Laos.

At the end of the Second World War, President Franklin Roosevelt had outlined a doctrine of American support for Third World decolonization, but also simultaneously began a process by which the United States—first passively, then actively—came to support France’s reoccupation of its Indochinese colonies after the war. This reversal stemmed largely from the changing calculus of global hegemony that we have come to know as the Cold War. While Roosevelt believed that Japanese aggression had been abetted by weak colonial governments around the Pacific Rim, the shift toward countering Soviet “aggression” demanded, he believed, a strong and thus colonially reequipped France to help shift the balance of power in Europe.

As recolonization stumbled with the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1945 and, a decade later, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the United States increasingly took up what its leaders saw as the anticomunist mandate in Indochina.
During the mid-1950s, the US government launched and scaled up both civilian and military aid programs to Laos and “South” Vietnam, aiming to create what the rhetoric of the day called “anticommunist bastions” to contain China and “North” Vietnam. The “domino theory” that Kennedy would later take up had been first articulated in 1954, as President Eisenhower tried to mobilize public support for the French in the weeks before Dien Bien Phu fell; later in the decade it would become a key talking point for US policy in the Mekong region. By the late 1950s, however, the American aid programs in both Laos and South Vietnam had become mired in corruption, fueling conspicuous consumption among urban elites but making minimal inroads into rural areas and the improvement of the respective local militaries. Despite making Laos the greatest per capita recipient of American aid at the time—$150 per year, more than twice the average annual income—the effectiveness of US support for Lao nation-building was limited. By one estimate, almost a third of all annual American aid revenues were linked to scandals or fraud involving “virtually every member of the country’s ruling elite.” The same observer wrote that the situation was “made to order for the communists.”

By January 1961, just as Eisenhower prepared to pass the American presidency to John F. Kennedy, events in Laos confirmed the American program to be failing badly, and the situation escalating—as it also was in the newly independent Congo—toward proxy war with the Soviet Union. As they did across the global South, US efforts ran increasingly into the politics of “non-alignment,” an effort among Third World leaders that, following the Bandung Conference of 1955, attempted to delink international development assistance from Cold War geopolitics. In Laos this came in the form of a military coup in mid-1960, led by an army officer and self-proclaimed Neutralist who, with substantial popular backing, reinstalled a prime minister who had been deposed only months earlier by an American-backed candidate in an election that was widely seen as rigged. Almost immediately a countercoup returned the anticommunist faction to power, but in doing so drove the Neutralists—including a large slice of the army—into alliance with the Marxist Pathet Lao (Lao Nation) party. In late 1960, as the Neutralists began receiving airlifts from the Soviet Union and with the Pathet Lao advised and assisted by the North Vietnamese, the US strategic position was seen to be deteriorating badly. This was the “Laotian crisis” that precipitated Eisenhower’s famous warning to the incoming President Kennedy: “If Laos is lost to the Free World, in the long run we will lose all of Southeast Asia.”
The response to what Blaufarb later called the unsuccessful US “effort to make political bricks without straw”\textsuperscript{30} centered on a reorientation to the uplands. First and foremost was a scaling up of the US “tribal program,” which allowed Washington to distance itself from the Royal Lao Army, which was linked to the embarrassing visibility of the countercoup, while simultaneously maintaining and even enhancing its military capabilities despite the international commitment to “neutralize” Laos formalized in the Geneva Accords of 1962. Although US work with Laos’s “hill tribes” had begun in the late 1950s, it was not until early 1961—the peak of the crisis—that the program began to occupy center stage with the launch of Operation Momentum, authorized during Eisenhower’s final weeks in office.\textsuperscript{31} This initiative brought together two earlier trajectories of irregular warfare in the region: on the one hand, French efforts begun in the early 1950s to channel “minority grievances” into anti–Viet Minh resistance, mostly in Vietnam but also in parts of Laos; and on the other hand, American efforts in Thailand begun during the Korean War to defend against a possible Chinese invasion by mobilizing ethnic-minority groups along the Thai-Burma border as paramilitary allies of the Thai state.\textsuperscript{32} These experiences formed the raw material for much of what followed.

Before 1961, US military advisers had done a limited amount of work with what remained of the ethnically organized, geographically localized militias (maquis) set up by the French counterinsurgency specialist (and later theorist) Roger Trinquier.\textsuperscript{33} Having started his career in French Indochina, organizing upland militias for customs enforcement in northern Tonkin, Trinquier later became notorious for his advocacy of torture during the Algerian War of Independence.\textsuperscript{34} As the United States took over French anti-communist efforts in the late 1950s, they retained his model but had to recruit and train their own fighters, since most of the French-trained militias had been killed in the months after Dien Bien Phu.\textsuperscript{35} Operation Momentum focused on reassembling one of these units, a Hmong maquis based in the mountains northeast of Vientiane, which boasted the leadership of Vang Pao, then a mid-level army officer and later a famous Hmong leader in the United States. Already up and coming—he had been sent to a seminar on counterinsurgency in the Philippines in 1958—Vang Pao was a key reason why the Hmong of northeastern Laos became, for the United States, what one historian of the secret war called “the right tribe in the right area at the right time.”\textsuperscript{36}

Seeking to minimize the visible US presence in Laos while also scaling up its military capabilities, Operation Momentum also brought in a program from Thailand developed there by the CIA: the Police Aerial Reinforcement
Unit, or “Paru.” Created in the 1950s, the Thai Paru forces worked to develop *maquis*-style relationships with the upland “hill tribes” of northern Thailand, whom they saw as a potential first line of defense if US support for the Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) were to erupt into a wider war.\(^{37}\) As Operation Momentum grew into a full-blown military apparatus, first in northeastern Laos and then in the northwest, the Paru played key roles as officers and trainers. In both locations, and especially in the latter, the Paru would be supplemented by additional “third-country nationals,” elaborated below, to help displace the visibility of Americans when it came to actual military activity.

Operation Momentum’s third leg was civilian logistical and infrastructural support, which had played a role in American operations in Laos before 1960 but was scaled up and militarized as the “tribal program” expanded and took increasing precedence. In keeping with the need to roll back visible US military involvement, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) became a hub for both military advising and logistics through the use of retired military “specialists,” as well as for coordinating the refugee relief effort; Blaufarb described this as “an AID-sponsored program fully integrated with the tribal effort, which sustained the families of the guerrillas and thereby provided a reassurance essential to morale.”\(^{38}\) Momentum also drew extensively on the services of Air America and a few other nominally private airlines owned by the CIA.\(^ {39}\) Negotiating the upland landscape reliably meant flying in and out of short, often steeply sloped and roughly cleared landing strips. This in turn required the services of specially developed “short-takeoff-and-landing” (STOL) airplanes, along with specially trained pilots. These three pieces—well-placed “hill tribes,” “third-country” adviser-coordinators like the Paru, and a nominally civilian logistics support network—were the key components of an upland territorial apparatus that came together in 1961 and expanded over the decade that followed.

**Nam Nyu**

The decision to expand the CIA’s tribal program from the Hmong *maquis* in the northeast into the Burma-China borderlands of the northwest came in mid-1962. After a turbulent and politically ambiguous 1961, the armed forces of the Royal Lao government, advised and assisted by American Green Berets, had lost the northwestern provincial capital of Houakhang in the spring of 1962 at the Battle of Namtha. (After 1975 Houakhang would be divided in half, forming today’s Luang Namtha and Bokeo provinces.) The loss had far-ranging repercussions. Locally, it posed the threat of an
unchallenged communist advance to Thailand, via a route that would later become the NEC. Nationally, the battle shifted the political terrain, giving the Pathet Lao additional leverage that produced a tentative agreement with the Royalists and Neutralists in the weeks that followed. In June 1962 all three factions went to Geneva for further negotiations, and in July they signed the Geneva Accords, formally “neutralizing” Laos and mandating the withdrawal of all foreign forces by October. As Blaufarb later acknowledged, the agreement did not actually mean that the US military presence in Laos came to an end. Instead, it “imposed certain constraints upon US military and paramilitary activity which greatly increased the delicacy of this involvement and complicated the operational problems it entailed.”

Operation Momentum, begun the previous year, had already developed the basic spatial model that the United States would use to quietly violate the Geneva Accords via the operations that Blaufarb would later classify under the umbrella of “unconventional war.” The program exemplified the US shift to the uplands, as well as the reconceptualization of Laos’s abundant rugged and forested terrain—including its corresponding lack of roads—from national liability into tactical advantage. Officially ending the earlier “White Star” military assistance program, the USAID program converted an old White Star base in the mountains north of Vientiane into a publicly acknowledged “refugee relief” center (run by USAID and serviced by Air America), and opened a secret military installation in the secluded mountain valley of Long Cheng just ten kilometers away—a long walk or a short STOL flight. This model, predicated on remoteness, small airplanes, and “civilian” aid, was replicated in the northwestern uplands, after the Battle of Namtha, in a place called Nam Nyu.

Although Laos’s “secret war” is usually discussed within the wider context of the Vietnam (or Second Indochina) War, Nam Nyu’s development was both motivated and influenced by US involvement in the Cold War’s “China theater.” Since the early 1950s, the CIA had been supporting the Chinese Nationalist KMT in the borderlands of Yunnan and then, after the KMT’s failed invasions in 1950, 1951, and 1952, in northern Burma and Thailand. As KMT soldiers remained in this landscape throughout the decade that followed, their recruitment of local allies—for purposes that combined ongoing insurgency with drug trafficking—brought them into the regional trade in arms and opium, as well as into alliance with future members of the Shan independence movement in Burma. The government of Burma objected to the KMT’s presence and took the issue to the United Nations in the mid-1950s, and when this produced limited results, appealed to Beijing for help “demarcating” the common border between the two
countries in 1960. In late 1960 and early 1961—just as the “Laotian crisis” emerged farther to the south—thousands of Chinese People’s Liberation Army troops came across the Yunnan border into northeastern Burma. They destroyed some KMT units but scattered others into the area that became increasingly known as the Golden Triangle.\(^{44}\) As US officials in Laos looked to take Operation Momentum into northwestern Laos in late 1962, they faced not only the Geneva Accords but also the immediate aftermath of this process. This turned out to be a mixed bag. On the one hand, the increased presence of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army in the region created the risk of escalation; on the other hand, the CIA had the old “assets” of the KMT at its disposal. In the effort that followed, it put them to extensive use.

The CIA’s base at Nam Nyu was set up in late 1962 and 1963 by a man named William Young, the CIA’s so-called tribal expert in the region.\(^{45}\) Young had grown up in northern Thailand, part of an American missionary family who had come—first to Burma, then to Thailand—in the early 1900s, and had ended up working for the CIA during its support for the KMT in the 1950s.\(^{46}\) Young had grown up speaking a number of local languages that would serve him well in Laos, including Hmong and Lahu, discussed below. After helping to get Operation Momentum off the ground in the Hmong area northeast of Vientiane, Young was sent to build an American maquis in Houakhong province, an ethnically diverse and especially roadless area that made up much of what the United States called Military Region I (see ch. 1).\(^{47}\) The province’s southern extent covered the northern reaches of the old kingdom of Luang Prabang and went as far north as the Mekong River, spanning the Lao portion of the old caravan-trade routes between Yunnan and Thailand that would later be reimagined as the NEC. To tackle and exploit this diversity, Young drew on the legacy of French colonialism, although he did so differently than Operation Momentum had done with the Hmong in the northeast. He also drew heavily on his family’s connections with the upland “tribes” that the CIA had helped mobilize in support of the KMT.

As Young developed a guerrilla force at Nam Nyu, he based the model on the same approach that the CIA used in Operation Momentum in northeastern Laos, but with a key difference. Lacking a local hill-tribe maquis—a local equivalent of Vang Pao’s Hmong militia—Young borrowed the only
recently defunct French-colonial structure of indirect rule, recruiting a pair of leaders from the Iu Mien ethnic group, Chao Mai and Chao La. (Chao means “lord” or “head.”) As anthropologist Hjorleifur Jonsson, who studied this community after many of its members became refugees, explains, “The father of Chao Mai and Chao La [who were brothers] . . . was known as Phya Long Hai, ‘cruel great chief,’ which suggests something other than an unqualified admiration.” Phya Long Hai’s political rise, Jonsson notes, was “not because he was the only leader” but due to his overshadowing of rivals “through tax collection and military suppression campaigns for the benefit of French colonial rule.”

The Iu Mien were opium growers, and were thus one of the ethnic groups that French colonial authorities classified as “evolved” in contrast to the indigenous Mon-Khmer groups like the Khmu, whom they viewed as backward. Opium was one of three state monopolies in French Indochina, along with salt and alcohol. It was thus central to the French policy of *mise en valeur*, an effort to make colonies economically self-sufficient by “developing” their resources; according to historian Geoffrey Gunn, opium “never contributed less than half the revenues of the general colonial budget” of French Indochina.

Opium was thus at the heart of indirect rule throughout the uplands of northern Indochina. While high taxes—paid in opium, cash, or corvée labor—led to material hardship and even revolt (especially before the 1930s), by the late-colonial period a number of the “evolved” upland leaders—people like Phya Long Hai and Vang Pao’s mentor and patron Touby Li Fung—had forged close and lucrative working relationships with colonial authorities. In setting up the anticommunist *maquis* units, both before 1954 (in the northeast) and after (as in the northwest), cold warriors like Trinquier and Young drew on these leaders’ coercive capabilities to provide soldiers, maintain social order, and otherwise staff the “unconventional” military activities of their respective countries.

To organize these activities spatially, the United States drew heavily on what has been called France’s *montagnard* (uplander) strategy. The essence of this approach had been to refashion the administrative architecture of colonial indirect rule into a human terrain of military resistance and upland autonomy. Where colonial rule had played ethnic tensions and hierarchies off each another to knit the social landscape together in a system of coercion-based extraction facilitated by upland middlemen like Phya Long Hai, the building of *maquis* units reinvested these tensions and hierarchies with a politics of local autonomy amid a wider landscape of late-colonial military strategy. As historian Alfred McCoy explains, the French *montagnard* program was the upland component of “a vast chessboard” that the French
developed during the First Indochina War, “where hill tribes, bandits, and religious minorities could be used as pawns to hold strategic territories and prevent Viet Minh infiltration. . . . The French hope was to atomize the Viet Minh’s mobilized, unified mass into a mosaic of autonomous fiefs hostile to the revolutionary movement.”

Young repeated this basic atomization approach at Nam Nyu, recruiting hundreds of troops for the base’s defense force from the followers of Chao Mai and Chao La, who had fled west from northeastern Houakhong province in the aftermath of the Battle of Namtha.

Enrolling an authority structure that had been built up by French rule, Young put it to work defending and monitoring the territory around Nam Nyu.

Young recruited from the other local “hill tribes” as well, drawing to Nam Nyu members of indigenous Mon-Khmer groups such as the Khmu and the Lamet. Here he seems to have drawn on the remains of the precolonial sakdina system, through which indigenous upland groups had forged mutually beneficial, if highly unequal, political relations with lowland states. Especially in the north, this had left the Royal Lao Army well staffed with skilled and dedicated soldiers from a number of upland groups; a prominent historian of Laos’s secret war describes Mon-Khmer soldiers as “fierce fighters” who “signed up in droves” for guerrilla forces like those deployed at Nam Nyu.

Young’s other major source of recruits came from the Lahu, the minority group that his family knew best, and whose presence in the borderlands of Burma, Laos, Thailand, and China made them ideal for CIA espionage work. Given Washington’s broader plans for military escalation (visibly in Vietnam, quietly in Laos), a key dimension of the CIA’s expansion into northwestern Laos was to be on the lookout for signs that China might be responding in kind. The Young family’s special relationship with the Lahu was integral to this effort.

William Young’s grandfather had been a Baptist missionary who arrived in Burma’s Shan states around 1900 and focused his efforts on the Lahu. His son had expanded the family’s mission northward into the Wa states, close along the Chinese border, in the 1930s. After being forced to move to Thailand after the Second World War, the Young family maintained their ties with Lahu communities in the Shan and Wa states, and as the KMT opened up a second front against China’s People’s Liberation Army in 1950, Young’s father and older brother—the future anthropologist and “hill tribe” expert Gordon Young—ran a CIA intelligence network using Lahu and Shan agents to report on troop movements in Yunnan. In 1962 and 1963, William Young integrated northwestern Laos into this already existing KMT-CIA network, bringing to Nam Nyu a group of Lahu and Shan intelligence veterans to coordinate Nam Nyu’s cross-border program and to recruit members of the
local upland communities for US intelligence work. Trainees would go first to Thailand, where they received radio and paramilitary training from the Paru, and then go on either three-to-four-month espionage missions into Yunnan or to one of two listening posts that the CIA maintained along the Burma-China border. As McCoy describes, this was quite an operation: “Using four-pound radios with a broadcast range of four hundred miles, the teams transmitted . . . directly to a powerful receiver at Nam Yu or to specially equipped Air America planes that flew back and forth along the Lao-Chinese border. . . . By . . . 1967, [Young] had opened three major radio posts within Burma’s Shan states, built a special training camp [in Phitsanoulouk, Thailand] that was graduating thirty-five agents every two months, and sent hundreds of teams deep into Yunnan.”

In the mid-1960s, as the “unconventional” operations overseen by Blaufarb and others expanded throughout Laos, Nam Nyu matured into a full-scale military base. By 1967 its military force numbered almost seven thousand, making it second only to Long Cheng, the Hmong maquis base in the northeast, discussed above. Like Long Cheng, Nam Nyu had an openly acknowledged “refugee center” a few kilometers away where USAID delivered food, supplies, medical assistance, and even education to families who had fled Namtha after its “fall” to communist forces. And as it did in Long Cheng, Air America connected Nam Nyu to urban hubs like Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Houei Sai, as well as to an ever-growing network of CIA-managed remote upland airfields, or “STOL sites.” This infrastructure was extensive. The 1970 edition of Air America’s Facilities Data book lists 281 STOL sites in Laos, while maps printed in 1975 by the US government’s Defense Mapping Agency Topographic Center in Washington, DC, show over 450.

By the mid-1960s, Nam Nyu had blurred the boundaries between what Blaufarb described as the “tribal” program’s key pieces: its most important “third-country advisers” (the so-called Sixteen Musketeers who managed cross-border operations) were “tribals” themselves, and the nominally “private” and “civilian” Air America was thoroughly imbricated not only with the logistics of aid provision but also with Nam Nyu’s espionage program. This blending was precisely the point in that it facilitated the outsourcing of the war effort, maintaining significant capacity with low US visibility. In the remote mountain base of Nam Nyu, the various pieces—hill tribes, the CIA, upland missionaries, the Paru, Air America, USAID, and the KMT—had jelled into one of the “various devices and expedients” that Blaufarb later described as allowing the United States to develop “a rather sizeable military response” in Laos while officially maintaining precisely the opposite.
Writing in 1971, Blaufarb found it difficult to fit US operations in Laos into familiar categories: “Perhaps,” he wrote, “we should simply style it an unconventional war, a term which calls attention to its outstanding characteristics.” One category of which Blaufarb was especially wary was one he later wrote a book about: counterinsurgency. In part, his reluctance had to do with the extent and devastation of the American bombing program. While the US Air Force did not play a role at Nam Nyu for reasons discussed below, its operations loomed extremely large in other parts of Laos; between 1964 and 1973, according to one historian, “the U.S. military dropped almost two million tons of bombs, which worked out to two thirds of a ton for every man, woman, and child.” Some of this was aimed at supporting the Hmong maquis northeast of Vientiane, while much of the rest of it targeted the Ho Chi Minh trail system in central and southern Laos. Bombing was still ongoing when Blaufarb was writing, and his report gave sample data from 1969 and 1970 that showed an average of over ten thousand attack sorties (individual plane flights) per month—and this excluded B-52 runs. He did not shy away from the bombing’s destructiveness, noting the “obliteration” of various district towns in both the northeast and the south (“Xieng Khouangville, Phongsavan . . ., Mahaxay and Tchepone”), although Blaufarb—ever the analyst—noted that “of course, such destruction did not stem from a deliberate decision but was a consequence of relaxed ground rules [and] a huge increase in available sorties.” His point, however, was that the destruction of the bombing pulled so obviously away from “winning hearts and minds” that there was no way the US operation could be classified as a counterinsurgency effort.

But there is an even more important dimension, for my purposes, to Blaufarb’s insistence on the term “unconventional.” This matters because it speaks directly to the strategic shift behind the upland reorientation at the heart of this chapter. Blaufarb was emphatic that “the tribal program . . . cannot be equated with a standard counter-insurgency effort aimed at rebuilding security and effective government in the countryside.” The reason had to do with the political geography of the conflict: “The [Lao Communist Party], in its own name and that of the dissident Neutralists, claimed control of most of the territory in which the tribesmen lived. Some it had in fact controlled and governed since the early 1950s, particularly in [the northeast]. The [Hmong] and other tribal movements were in large part popular resistance against a government perceived as oppressive, rather than an effort to secure the countryside for a threatened government.”
Here, Blaufarb was describing the mosaic *maquis* geography exemplified by bases like Nam Nyu and Long Cheng, contrasting them with standard counterinsurgency operations to secure the countryside “for a threatened [national] government.” The US military was certainly familiar with counterinsurgency, having practiced and studied it extensively in the Philippines and Central America during the 1920s and 1930s, and having attempted it with the strategic-hamlet program in both Vietnam and Laos beginning in the mid-1950s. In 1957 the CIA had actually sent an agent, Rufus Phillips, to Laos to set up a USAID “civic action” program inspired by the strategic-hamlet program in Vietnam, which he had just helped the famed counterinsurgency specialist Edward Lansdale develop. But as Blaufarb explained (and Phillips later lamented in his memoir), Washington abandoned this earlier program of civic action, nation-building, and counterinsurgency-oriented development in the wake of the Laotian crisis of 1960–61; it opted instead for the operations described above.

Blaufarb explained this change carefully, beginning with the assertion that the earlier US policy on Laos contained “one crippling flaw”: the assumption “that Laos was a nation with sufficient national unity, leadership, and political and social infrastructure to use U.S. aid effectively in a policy of firm resistance to its enemies.” This culminated in the passage quoted at length at the beginning of this chapter. In arguing that “history and terrain” had divided Laos “into separate regions, with little to bind these together,” that the population was “a mixture of races and religions” who regarded each other “with fear and hostility,” that the elite were little more than “rival clans” competing for riches rather than popular allegiance, and that the territory itself was “underdeveloped in every way” (lacking infrastructure and comprising instead “a rugged, roadless expanse of jungled hills and limestone ridges”), Blaufarb could have been offering a withering critique of France’s colonial legacy in Laos. He was not; his purpose was far more practical. In his estimation, building “a firm anti-Communist ‘bastion’ on the borders of China and Vietnam” would have required raw materials that were far more *nation*-like than Laos had to offer: a better infrastructure network, greater regional integration, a public ideal among the elite and members of the government, and an ethnic landscape that was more unified than it was divided and tribalized. Blaufarb’s account of Laos’s national shortcomings was in this regard not so much a critique of French colonialism as an acceptance and even a tactical embrace of its legacy. Laos, he argued, did not merit being considered on its own terms, but was better thought of—and after 1960 had been treated—as a “buffer zone against North Vietnamese pressures” and “a secondary theater” relative to Vietnam.
decided that Laos was not a nation to be defended but a fractured terrain whose physical and social characteristics could be exploited for larger geopolitical purposes, the uplands turned from a strategic problem into a strategic asset, and tactical failure into tactical success.

“THE CHINESE BORDER HAS ALREADY BEEN SHIFTED SOUTHWARD”

Even in Blaufarb’s Machiavellian use of the term, however, this success was short-lived. Less than four years after its writing, the Pathet Lao declared victory and, in December 1975, announced the creation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. With this, the Lao uplands would revert to being a national problem space much as they had been before 1960, albeit with post-war complications.

But even as Blaufarb was completing his report, the denationalized landscape that was both premise and product of the system he described was being undone by an activity that increasingly became a target of US analysis and concern in the years that followed: roadbuilding by the Chinese military. As US involvement in Laos began to wind down as part of the Nixon administration’s wider disengagement from Southeast Asia in the late 1960s and early ’70s, American attention to northern Laos focused increasingly on monitoring a new road network that was undoing the very isolation and remoteness upon which its operations of the last decade had been premised. The roadbuilding had begun in the wake of the Pathet Lao victory at Namtha; but its slow start meant that its effects on the upland territoriality described in this chapter were initially minimal. But once in place, the infrastructure it created was a key progenitor of the regionalization-inspired connectivity that would follow in the 1990s and 2000s, and it helped lay the groundwork, quite literally, for what later became the NEC. The “Chinese road” (as the Americans called it) directly contributed to the Pathet Lao’s overrunning the base at Nam Nyu in 1973. But in challenging the fractured territoriality that was central to US strategy, it also introduced a form of integration that, while theoretically conducive to nation-building and territorial integration, anticipated contemporary anxieties about Chinese influence in the north-west. In doing so, it helped set the stage—both alongside and in tension with the US activities discussed above—for contemporary events.

Chinese roadbuilding in Laos during the 1960s and early 1970s ambiguously blended economic aid with military strategy. The Lao government’s initial invitation had come in 1961 during a diplomatic visit to Beijing by Laos’s Neutralist prime minister, and was apparently aimed at counterbalancing
Soviet influence in the northeast, which was growing at the time via its resupply of the Pathet Lao, mentioned above. The Chinese road began as a single route, connecting the far-north province of Phongsaly, where the prime minister had political allies, with southern Yunnan; then, as now, roadbuilding was difficult to argue against in a landscape where connectivity figured so centrally to communication, trade, and the provision of government services. But as the plan was announced by Beijing, it morphed in both geography and direction, expanding significantly and heading south and west rather than simply east (see map on p. xvi). This seems to have been due in part to an unwritten request made by the Lao representative, a Royalist general and onetime prime minister himself, who had been sent to China to finalize the arrangement on the prime minister’s behalf.82 Then, on top of that, the unofficial request to extend the road to Luang Namtha expanded even more, for reasons that remain unclear. Shortly after this second visit, Chinese radio announced the roadbuilding aid as planning to extend not just to Namtha but also to Houei Sai, on the Mekong River opposite the Thai border. As the US ambassador to Laos who inherited this situation put it long after the fact, “confusion persisted” on multiple levels.83 Why had a Royalist general—and close ally of the United States—invited “the Chinese” to build an extra road into a communist stronghold area? How had the further expansion of the project’s scope—all the way to the Thai border—come about? What was its intent? The plans for the extra roadbuilding struck at the heart of US anxieties about communist expansion in the region: as the US ambassador’s account explained, “The arm that could push down a row of dominoes seemed then to be stretching out to do just that.”84

After the radio announcement in 1962, Chinese official communication about the road’s progress ceased.85 Over the decade that followed, however, the multiple roads that emerged in its wake would be monitored heavily by US intelligence, including by the teams based at Nam Nyu and their various forms of air support discussed above. The details—from the roads’ orientation southwest toward Thailand, to their heavy equipment and, starting around 1970, the antiaircraft installations that in some cases accompanied their construction—ensured that as “confusion persisted,” it was the sort of confusion that carried significant geopolitical weight. Both the CIA and US congressional representatives would have much to say about Chinese roadbuilding as they tangled with each other in the late 1960s and early 1970s over the scope and secrecy of ongoing US involvement in Laos. As the US ambassador noted, Chinese roadbuilding was “particularly laden with strategic and tactical considerations” and was never just about transportation and communication.86
The roadbuilding began slowly. During the first half of the decade it made only minimal inroads into the upland northwest, leaving the military situation there uncertain, if hopeful, for the United States and its allies. A US Intelligence Bulletin reported in June 1965, “the military situation” in Laos “remains fluid in several areas. . . . [In the northwest,] a Communist clearing operation southwest of Nam Tha along Route 3”—at the time an unpaved road that the CIA would later call a “long-disused French logging trail” in reference to its poor condition—“has apparently stalled. Government guerrilla units are now regrouping in preparation for a counterattack against Vieng Phoukha, which Communists seized on 25 May.” Vieng Phoukha was a strategic location because it sat astride this old French road in the middle of the northwestern uplands, a key node between the provincial capital in Namtha and the town of Huei Sai on the Thai border. Vieng Phoukha changed hands a few times in the 1960s, reflecting in part the lack of reliable road access for the Pathet Lao and the associated viability of the “irregular” operations profiled above. In the months after the bulletin quoted above, for instance, the counterattack was indeed successful. This success, however, was undercut by the bigger picture of Chinese roadbuilding from the north. The month before the recapture operation succeeded, a Chinese-built road from the northern part of the province reached the capital Namtha, only about thirty-five miles away.

The half decade from mid-1968 brought a further expansion toward the south and west. The route that today comprises the eastern third of the NEC, from the Luang Namtha provincial capital to the town of Boten on the Lao-China border, was built by Chinese military engineers during the rainy season of 1968. So was a second road, a spur heading southeast to Oudomxai from the Namtha-to-Boten road. In the two years that followed, the road expanded farther southwest from Oudomxai, reaching almost to the Mekong River town of Pakbeng, located in what is today the southwestern part of Oudomxai province. If the route to Namtha was hard to dispute on the merits of economic aid, the latter road toward Pakbeng was downright alarming, not only to US and Thai government observers but also reportedly even to the Lao Neutralists.

Ironically, a 1971 US congressional investigation into ongoing CIA involvement in Laos helped bring to light the extent of the Chinese roadbuilding. Since earlier public knowledge had focused largely on the northeast (the focus of Operation Momentum, discussed above), the northwest figured centrally in congressional alarm at the wider extent of US operations. As the summary of the congressional investigation, a report titled Laos: April 1971, noted with concern:
The Chinese presence has increased in northern Laos, from between 6,000 and 8,000, as of 2 years ago, to between 14,000 and 20,000 at the present time. The road the Chinese are building in northern Laos has been improved in recent months; and its antiaircraft and associated radar have been heavily increased. In the opinion of knowledgeable U.S. officials, from an antiaircraft standpoint that area is now one of the most heavily defended areas in the world. . . . The practical effect of the Chinese road is that the Chinese border has already been shifted southward to encompass a substantial portion of northern Laos.93

The road network’s further expansion over the next two years helped usher in the defeat of the CIA’s model of upland territoriality detailed above. The Oudomxai road reached Pakbeng, on the Mekong River, in March 1972, one part of the “mixed messaging” that American officials perceived the Chinese government to be sending: as the ambassador’s account cited above noted, only weeks after President Nixon and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai released their “historic joint communiqué” from Shanghai on renewed US-China relations, “the first Chinese infantry regiment moved into the Muong Sai [Oudomxai] area of northwest Laos; and road-workers were completing the segment to Pak Beng, a sophisticated operation, with bulldozers, graders, and cement mixers.”94

Farther north in Luang Namtha, roadbuilding also continued apace. This spur, which had reached Namtha in mid-1968, covered half the distance from Namtha to Vieng Phouha by late 1972, and by early 1973 had reached the village of Ta Fa, well past Vieng Phoukha and near the present-day Luang Namtha–Bokeo provincial border. As part of this continued push westward, the base at Nam Nyu fell to Pathet Lao forces in February 1973; CIA analysts writing at the time called this the loss of “the [Royal Lao] government’s principal military base in the northwest.” They also read the ramping up of Chinese roadbuilding in the geopolitical terms of a coming end to the war, which was now only a matter of time: “Peking apparently wished to have both [the Oudomxai and Namtha] roads, which might cause concern in neighboring states [i.e., Thailand], well under way before a Lao settlement in order to spare Prime Minister Souvanna difficulties in attempting to justify them as ‘aid projects.’”95 In the decades that followed, similar questions about aid, connectivity, and geopolitical intent—albeit in a post-Cold War world—would remain persistent features of the northwestern landscape.
The “various devices and expedients” of US upland war-making continued to influence events in Laos long after the formation of the Lao PDR in 1975. As anthropologist Grant Evans noted in his introduction to the 1999 collected volume Laos: Culture and Society, “One of the paradoxes of studying Laos is that even those people most engaged in its affairs have questioned whether Laos exists as a ‘real’ national entity.” As representatives of “those people most engaged in its affairs,” Evans quoted such Cold War luminaries as Arthur Dommen, Bernard Fall, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and the French novelist Jean Lartéguy—men who referred to Laos, respectively, as “more a conglomeration of ‘tribes’ than a people,” “neither a geographical nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience,” “a state by diplomatic courtesy,” and “a figment of the imagination of a few French administrators.” Evans explained these descriptions as stemming from an ideology “of ‘natural’ nations rather than historical ones.” While perhaps true, they were also driven by direct and often partisan involvement: Schlesinger was best known for being an insider historian of the Kennedy presidency, while Fall and Dommen were both journalist-historians who emerged as authoritative voices on “the Indochina question” during the 1960s; though at times critical of American policy, their analyses were firmly on the side of Western anticommunism. Jean Lartéguy was a French novelist who lionized the “centurions” like Roger Trinquier, the architect of the French “montagnard strategy” described above, who guarded the gates of empire even as they were abandoned by the politicians back home. Given these histories, Evans’s “paradox” begins to unravel when the discourse of Laos’s national unreality is placed alongside the upland reorientation of American policy detailed above. The men who suggested that Laos was not a “real” country were not merely ideological with respect to nations in general; theirs was a prejudice deeply embedded in the Asian “theater” of the Cold War.

There were, not surprisingly, dissenters within the camp of US advisers and operatives who were committed to nation-building, rather than denationalization, in the uplands. One was Rufus Phillips, the CIA operative mentioned above who was sent to Laos in 1957 to conduct a “civic action” program modeled on the one in Vietnam, but whose efforts ended up hamstrung by various political-bureaucratic frictions in both the American aid bureaucracy and the Royal Lao government. Another especially telling critique came from Joel Halpern, a UCLA anthropologist who was based in Luang Prabang in 1957 as the USAID mission’s northern field representative. His analysis sits uneasily on both sides of the reorientation described in this chapter. Halpern was clearly one of those who believed in
anticommunist nation-building as both a program and a political possibility. His critique of what he called “Little America” is chilling, however, in that it advocated precisely the sort of “up-country” move that the CIA would subsequently make, although with a very different analysis and a very different plan. Little America, wrote Halpern, “may be defined as the intellectual culture of official American government personnel residing in Vientiane, Laos, in 1957. It also includes the various American material imports which have made possible to a significant extent a way of life fundamentally similar to that of middle-class government workers in Washington, D.C.”

In Halpern’s estimation, the “Little America” model of development assistance was fundamentally disconnected from the lives of 90 percent or more of the Lao population; it attended little to transferring actual skills via the cultivation of sustained personal relationships; and it was largely seen by “the Lao villager”—a figure with whom Halpern was especially concerned—as enriching the urban elite while doing little for anyone else. Halpern’s critique was a constructive one, however: he recommended transforming Little America into a different sort of aid apparatus by reining in the material excess of expatriate life in Vientiane and shifting US aid efforts toward the rural sphere where most Lao people actually lived. He suggested that American aid focus on knowledge transfer by fostering relationship development and explicitly putting “ideas before materials”; that it emphasize the need for its staff to learn local languages and appreciate “local cultural values”; and that it place more emphasis on developing a presence in the countryside, especially among ethnic minorities. Halpern’s critique was circulated as a report “prepared for limited distribution within the United States” and indicated that the danger was already clear and present in 1958. It ended with this: “The United States Operations Mission to Laos is by no means a lost cause, but present methods and procedures will not ensure success; new ways and ideas must be found and tried.”

New ways and ideas were indeed found, although in places that Halpern likely did not have in mind: the French rearguard strategy for fighting the First Indochina War, and the CIA’s support for the KMT in the borderlands of Yunnan, Burma, and Thailand. Halpern’s critique of Little America thus illuminates a key thread running between the “Vietnam” era, the late Cold War period of the 1980s (ch. 3), and the present day. As Washington abandoned its nation-building strategy in Laos as “unrealistic,” it nonetheless continued to keep its eyes not only on the prize of geopolitical containment but on the tool with which to achieve it: local populations. As US leaders discarded the idea that Laos was a country that could be defended through
political means, they stopped listening to men like Rufus Phillips and Joel Halpern in favor of those like William Young and Douglas Blaufarb—men who could see local populations in terms divorced from those imposed by the idea of the nation. Colonial anthropology and missionary work provided this framework readily: that of the tribe, and in particular the “hill tribe.” In such a context, Blaufarb’s comment that the unconventional war in Laos was not quite a counterinsurgency operation is an understatement. It was a military operation aimed at taking tactical advantage of the gap between people and geography on the one hand, and nation-ness on the other. In so doing, it further expanded that gap and helped spawn a whole discourse of Lao national unreality that, as Evans points out, remains a cliché “even among those people most engaged in its affairs.”

Laos was hardly the only place where this was happening. In 1976 Seymour Deitchman, a defense analyst, published an insider’s account of Project Camelot, a Defense Department effort to recruit social scientists to counterinsurgency research in 1964 that was scrapped when news of it leaked out. Deitchman’s account quotes extensively from a number of official sources to describe what he calls the Cold War “mentality” of many Washington insiders in the early 1960s—a mentality illustrated by Blaufarb above and in the 1963 report quoted in the chapter’s epigraph. One of Deitchman’s sources, taken from anonymous congressional testimony from the 1965 “Hearings on Winning the Cold War,” traces an arc from the US military’s earlier experience during the Second World War with social science (aptitude testing, teamwork psychology, isolation and combat stress experiments, etc.) to its newfound needs with respect to the civilian populations of the developing world. In describing the US military’s need to better deal with “the developing nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America” in the context of the Cold War, the testimony highlights the dark utility of people like Young and Blaufarb: “The [Cold] war itself revolves around the allegiance and support of the local population. The Defense Department has therefore recognized that part of its research and development efforts to support counterinsurgency operations must be oriented toward the people, United States and foreign, involved in this type of war; and the DOD has called on the types of scientists—anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists—whose professional orientation to human behavior would enable them to make useful contributions in this area.”

The Pentagon’s history of enrolling social scientists in counterinsurgency work has, by now, been well documented, and widely and critically discussed. What is often downplayed, however, is the fact that social science—and in particular what came to be known in the 1960s as “hill tribe
anthropology”—was also put to work doing precisely the opposite of counterinsurgency: exploiting ethnic and geographic tensions for wider political purposes because they worked against nation-building. As Blaufarb emphasized and as this chapter shows, US efforts to meet the “communist threat” in Laos sought to recruit portions of “the local population” to destabilize a national landscape by exacerbating its political fault lines. “Tribal experts” like Roger Trinquier and William Young saw the upland landscape as the Achilles’ heel of lowland nation-building. These men were not the trained academics whose intellectualism often frustrated military efforts to use their expertise. They were more like right-wing versions of what political theorist Antonio Gramsci called “organic intellectuals,” people whose life experience made them skilled practitioners, organizers, and strategists. In this case, those skills were aimed at assembling and managing the maquis landscapes of upland proxy war via the “devices and expedients” described above. Their efforts cast a long historical shadow in precisely the direction pointed to by Blaufarb’s distinction between counterinsurgency and unconventional war. This distinction was anything but academic. In enrolling members of the population into a project of denationalizing the Lao uplands, the unconventional operations described above marked certain communities, through a mix of ethnicity and location, as being against the socialist nation-building project. In the years after Blaufarb, Young, and others left, these marks would not be forgotten.