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November 11, 1987

Professor Matthew Meselson
Biochemistry and Molecular Biology
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Dear Professor Meselson:

Thank you for sending me a copy of your latest co-authored publication on the "yellow rain" controversy. I am appreciative and, as usual, rather irritated. My irritation stems not from the basic thesis of the article, that the U.S. Government's case for communist instigated CBW in Laos and Cambodia is untenable, but from what I consider to be a misrepresentation of the Hmong role in the controversy. In your contribution to Foreign Policy, you appear to be taking greater pains than previously to avoid negative implications regarding Hmong involvement in Laotian politics. Unfortunately, the tendency to discredit the Hmong along with those who argued the "yellow rain" case on behalf of the U.S. Government has not been corrected.

Despite what you say about the term "yellow rain" being first used by an English-speaking Hmong (page 102, paragraph 2), I must conclude that this expression was a journalistic invention. It is possible, that the Hmong informant decided to employ a figure of speech intelligible to the reporter, but no Hmong counterpart existed until wide English usage forced a back translation into Hmong. At the time of the report that you cite, the Hmong in Laos believed that various forms of lethal tshuaj were being used against them by the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese. The word tshuaj can refer to many kinds of processed substances, such as herbal medicines, gunpowder (tshuaj tua phom, literally, 'powder to fire a gun'), or chemicals in general. Thus, "medicine from the sky" (page 102, paragraph 1) is a ridiculous translation that makes the Hmong look silly, and incapable of good observation.

Descriptions provided by the Hmong in the late 1970's of chemical weapon attacks allegedly perpetrated by the communists mostly concerned white, pinkish/red, yellow, and black gases delivered in exploding projectiles, such as rockets fired from propeller driven aircraft. Liquid agent disseminated in a shower of yellow droplets that dried to congealed powder were not widely discussed by the Hmong until the U.S. press and various investigators began emphasizing the so-called "yellow rain" attacks that have become the center of an extremely confused controversy.

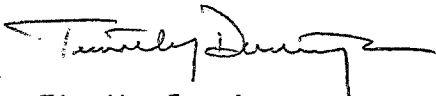
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Has it occurred to you that the confrontation over the reality of CBW in Southeast Asia is, in some respects, analagous to that earlier conflict that turned so many Hmong into refugees? I agree with many of your criticisms regarding the inadequate way in which putative witnesses were interviewed. Hmong perspectives were treated as important only to the extent that they supported the ends of the U.S. State department, or their critics. The Hmong were "recruited" to advance positions that were not really theirs. In the process, they were shamelessly used by both sides. The U.S. Government, believing that they had found the "smoking gun," based its entire case on "yellow rain." But the "smoking gun" turned out to be a cheap "Saturday night special" that didn't function. I believe that, the as a result of being pressured to respond to preoccupations of others, the Hmong were induced to give distorted versions of their experiences. And there was also the serious problem of misinterpretations of what they actually said. Skeptics, such as you, were able to demolish what initially appeared to be conclusive evidence in support of the "yellow rain" theory. As at an earlier time in northeast Laos, the Hmong found themselves at the center of the struggle in which their interests were of little concern to the principal antagonists. They were again being stigmatized for having associated with the loosing side. This stimatization is clearly implied in your Foreign Policy article. The Hmong are portrayed as either sophisticated liars or naive story tellers who tend to "relate what they hear and feel" as though it happened directly to them. It may surprise you, Professor Meselsen, but the Hmong have the same capacity to report facts as other peoples. Do not look for something in the psychological makeup or worldview of the Hmong that casts doubt upon the reliability of statements contained in the interview transcripts. Such arguments are racist. I feel comfortable supporting your position regarding evidence that has been adduced for and against CBW in Southeast Asia so long as the reliability of evidence rather than the character of an entire people is being called into question.

I would like to hear your response to the above comments before sending a version of this letter to Foreign Policy.

Sincerely,



Timothy Dunnigan