

No Meo Wanted:
Shifting Views on Hmong “Worthiness” for Resettlement to the U.S.

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In a July 18, 1975 cable, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Charles Whitehouse prepared his staff for a number of questions he thought the press might ask them. To the potential question, “Will the U.S. take some or all of the Meo refugees to the U.S.?” Whitehouse instructed U.S. embassy staff to reply, “There is no plan to resettle Meo refugees in the United States.” U.S. refugee personnel from the time, including Mac Thompson and John Tucker, confirm this stance. “My understanding,” says Thompson, “is that decisions had been made that the Hmong . . . were not eligible for U.S. resettlement.” According to Tucker, a “senior USAID management-type” issued a cable stating that the Hmong “were far too primitive to ever be considered for settlement in the U.S. because they were straight out of the trees.”

If such ignorant opinions were held by decision-makers in Thailand and Washington, D.C., who were the individuals and what were the circumstances making it possible for the Hmong and other hill tribes to be accepted for resettlement to the United States? This paper, based on consultation with recently declassified state department cables, as well as interviews with numerous individuals involved in this process back in the mid-1970s, will discuss some of the forces that changed U.S. policy—or at least practice—regarding the resettlement of the Hmong people to the United States.