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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 186 Creation of Hmong-Lao Veterans Day

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for hearing testimony today on Senate Bill 186 (Assembly Bill 154), the creation of Hmong-Lao Veterans Day in the State of Wisconsin. I appreciate your time and consideration on this well-deserved and overdue honor.

The Hmong are a group of people who had traditionally lived in isolated villages throughout the mountainous regions of Vietnam and Laos. They have maintained a distinctive culture: their own way of dress, their own music and literature, their own history, and, above all, their incredible devotion to their family and way of life. Before the 1950's, little was known about the Hmong as they had relatively no contact with those outside of their communities – they valued their autonomy, celebrated their way of life, and lived off the land their families had been farming for hundreds of years.

Throughout the Vietnam War, the United States recruited and worked in cooperation with thousands of ethnic Hmong to fight against the North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is referred to as the “Secret War” in Laos. Recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), their primary endeavors were to disrupt the supply chain of munitions and North Vietnamese soldiers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, help to protect and defend strategic points such as communication towers and radar stations, and to retrieve American fighter pilots shot down behind enemy lines. These Hmong soldiers fought valiantly during this covert war to help aid and assist the American effort of preventing communism from spreading deeper into Southeast Asia. They fought on the ground, flew combat missions, directed air strikes, and gathered valuable enemy surveillance that they shared with the American forces. The Hmong were not just our ally in this effort, but also our Brothers- and Sisters-In-Arms.

Many do not know the incredible sacrifices the ethnic Hmong made in the war effort. In terms of both military and civilian casualties, they suffered tremendous losses for their involvement. Before the war, it is estimated that between 300,000 and 400,000 Hmong lived in Laos. While it is extremely difficult to accurately estimate the loss of life, it is widely believed that more than 20,000 soldiers were killed and around 100,000 civilians lost their lives during the war. Of course, as we all know, America lost 58,220 of her troops fighting for that common goal of stopping the spread of communism and ensuring liberty for all peoples of Southeast Asia.

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Following the fall of Saigon in April of 1975, many of these Hmong patriots and their families fled the region to settle in refugee camps. They left behind their homes and possessions with the dreams of resettling in pro-democracy Western nations. By 1978, nearly 30,000 of these refugees had settled in the United States. Unfortunately, those who stayed behind were subjected to genocide-like conditions. There have been widely reported accounts of the “repatriation” of 4,000 Hmong who had fled to Thailand following the war but when forced to return to Laos, nearly all were sent to concentration camps and eventually killed for their “betrayal” in working with the Americans.

The Refugee Act of 1980 and the Hmong Veterans Naturalization Act of 2000, however, opened the way for additional families of the Secret Army to seek citizenship and safety within the US. Today, there are over 200,000 ethnic Hmong living in the United States, predominantly in central California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In fact, according to the 2010 census, we are blessed to have around 50,000 Hmong in Wisconsin, making them the largest ethnic Asian population in our state.

Furthermore, it is estimated that there are approximately 3,500 Hmong veterans in the United States, with around 1,000 currently living in Wisconsin. Each veteran has their own personal story of bravery and sacrifice, one that should be both commemorated and appreciated. Their stories of courage need to be told – and their sacrifices remembered.

Therefore, I am proud to stand with the Hmong community today as we put forward legislation to designate May 14th as Hmong-Lao Veterans Day, to honor those soldiers who fought for freedom in Southeast Asia. The bill is modeled closely after bipartisan legislation authored last year by Rep. Tou Xiong, a Hmong-American Democratic (DFL) state legislator from Minnesota, and a bill passed previously in Alaska. It aims to recognize the sacrifices made by the Hmong people and to honor the bravery of those Hmong soldiers who fought on the side of liberty a half century ago. I have worked with the Hmong community in my district and across the state to bring the concept to fruition and I am so proud to see many of them with us here today to speak on behalf of this bill.

In short, the bill calls for the governor to issue a proclamation each year to recognize and honor May 14th as Hmong-Lao Veterans Day and calls for the flag at the State Capitol to be lowered to half-staff that day in their honor. The bill also encourages schools to take a portion of their day to recall and discuss the accomplishments and sacrifices made by the Hmong Veterans.

With this recognition, we can help to remember the sacrifices of the Hmong community, honor the fallen soldiers for their valiant fight for freedom, and educate future generations of the strong bonds of friendship between the United States of America and the Hmong people.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.