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Final Abandonment of POWs?

Who says President Clinton is not serious about resolving the issue of POW/MIAs who were left behind in Southeast Asia? Why, he unveiled a postage stamp in June commemorating those men while speaking warmly of the cooperative efforts of the Vietnamese who, he said, are now doing more “than ever before.”

While there is a degree of truth in that statement, it isn't what the President meant. For an overwhelming amount of evidence shows that in Vietnam (and Laos), as after the Korean War and World War II, there has been cooperation by the U.S. government with Communist authorities to cover up facts about men who were known to have been alive but left in the hands of the Reds.

In the case of the Vietnam War (as this magazine has long noted), top American officials had every reason to believe there were men remaining after our final pullout. While it took years before such statements were made publicly, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency during Operation Homecoming in 1973, James Schlesinger, testified before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs that his knowledge gave him a “high-probability assessment that people were left behind in Laos and a medium-probability with regard to Vietnam.”

Even more compelling confirmation has been given by Air Force Lieutenant General Eugene Tighe (testifying in 1981 while head of the Defense Intelligence Agency), who stated bluntly that “American servicemen are alive and being held against their will in Southeast Asia.” The question remains: Where are those men? Could they still be alive? Consider that last year a former South Korean officer named Cho Chang Ho, who spent 13 years in a North Korean prison plus three decades in their coal mines, escaped to South Korea. He had been listed as killed in action during the Korean War. Might not some Americans, once known to be alive in North Korea, still be living? How about in Communist Vietnam?

Games with Remains

In short, the U.S. government knowingly abandoned its men. There is so much evidence to support this position that there can be little doubt of it. Nonetheless, the evidence continues to be resisted by our own government despite proof that Hanoi is holding back information about many of our men, some of whom the U.S. knows were alive in Vietnamese hands.

The American public is given eyewash about how helpful the Reds have now become. Why, we are told, the Vietnamese are allowing us to search for remains (which is an expensive backdoor way of paying for cooperation that means little). Every now and again there are photographs of bones of supposed American personnel being sent home, as if this proves Hanoi's empathy. The tragic fact is that most of these have turned out to be the remains of animals or non-Americans.

Even with bones, which should not be the crux of the matter, there has been a lot of shilly-



shallying. Richard Childress, former director of Asian Affairs on the National Security Council, recently testified before the House Committee on International Relations. During the Reagan years, “under a strategy of strict reciprocity,” he said, the Vietnamese returned the remains of 208 Americans. “Under the Clinton Administration’s approach of providing incentives in advance, to include lifting the restrictions on international financial lending, the lifting of the trade embargo, and the establishment of liaison offices, only 30 Americans have been accounted for, none through unilateral Vietnamese actions and only eight since lifting the trade embargo which was to usher in a resumption of full cooperation.”

“How can one then assert,” asked Childress, “that progress has been superb, outstanding, unprecedented? How can people proclaim there has been more progress in the past two years than ever before?” Well, they can lie.

More Skepticism

The Vietnamese have certainly been lying. And why not? They broke the Pads Peace Accords and have been rewarded for doing so. Some U.S. officials have pointed out that Hanoi repeatedly had told them, sometimes formally and sometimes informally, that they had no photographs or other documents about missing men, only to turn over some of those very materials in 1992. In the case of such documents, the reaction of the Clinton Administration has been deceptive. While the Administration is pretending that Hanoi is opening all its files, out of the thousands of documents and artifacts turned over in recent years about one percent pertain to missing American personnel.

POW debriefings of the 591 men who came back during Operation Homecoming remain classified. While there are reasons not to publish those, what do these men think? The American Legion sent out 500 questionnaires, to which they got a 47 percent response. As summarized by John F. Sommer Jr., executive director of the American Legion: “Eleven percent [of those responding] believed they had firsthand information on POWs who did not return during Operation Homecoming. Thirteen percent believed the Vietnamese operated additional prison systems from which American POWS did not return. Fifteen percent believed the Vietnamese segregated POWs having particular technical or intelligence knowledge and either transferred them to other countries or did not return them during Operation Homecoming.”

Hanoi’s record-keeping is known to be extensive and meticulous concerning POWs. Former POW/MIA investigator Garnett Bell testified on June 28th before a subcommittee headed by Representative Robert Dornan (R-CA): “If one takes a close look at documentation of their wartime accounting procedures, it should be obvious that the Vietnamese are merely using a ruse in the hope that our policy-makers will cooperate with them in creating an illusion of tangible progress when, in reality, none exists.”

A report by intelligence expert Dr. Joseph Douglass appearing in **Conservative Review** established with massive documentation and firsthand information some specifics about American prisoners being taken from Vietnam for, among other uses, medical and interrogation



experimentation. Detailed evidence came from a high-ranking former Czech general, Jan Sejna (who has subsequently worked for the DIA), who reported that he not only took part in the planning of the operation (which was done at the behest of Moscow), but saw some of the captured men involved himself. Douglass writes that “Sejna was present several times when the vans unloaded the POWs at the military counter-intelligence barracks and personally visited the POWs there and at the various secret villas to ensure the operation was going according to plan.”

Sabotage From Both Sides

Over the years U.S. government officials have lied, misrepresented, and otherwise sabotaged records and efforts to gain a full accounting of our men. Some in our government simply didn't want to know about men left in Southeast Asia, possibly alive. Major General Thomas Needham, former commander of the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTFFA), personally shredded irreplaceable investigative field reports about missing Americans while he was at the American Embassy in Bangkok. A mistake? Under Needham, JTFFA is said to have piled on case investigations while calling for resolutions in shorter periods of time, compromising the probes. When Vietnamese report seeing Americans, the JTFFA hands their names to Communist officials, notes author Al Santoli, now an assistant with Representative Robert Dornan (R-CA): “This is akin to FBI agents handing the names of mob informants to Mafia chieftains to ask for assistance in preparing investigations on kidnaping and extortion cases.”

Recent congressional testimony from Michael Janich, a POW/MIA investigator, puts the lie to the supposed cooperation by the Hanoi regime. While he was there, Janich “experienced and reported in detail to my superiors regular occurrences of witness coaching, prompting, and intimidation by my Vietnamese counterparts. I also experienced and reported the intentional withholding of information and documents by Vietnamese officials and witnesses and levels of cooperation so low that they would more properly be considered obstructions of our investigation efforts.”

In Laos, similar non-cooperation has occurred on the few occasions when investigators have been permitted. The Pentagon has long maintained that 85 percent of the Americans lost (over 500 are still unaccounted for in Laos) were in areas under the control of North Vietnam. There is evidence that we knew of live Americans in Laos and did nothing.

Live-sightings in recent years were investigated by, among others, Major Sandra Caughlin. In September 1994, she summarized several practices that “lead us to believe the results of these investigations are not credible, [and] force us to question the validity of *all* the live-sighting investigations (LSI) that have been conducted in Laos to date.” During congressional questioning, it was dragged from James Wold, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Prisoners of War/Missing in Action, as well as from Gary Sydow of the Defense Intelligence Agency, that coaching and intimidation of witnesses continue to occur in Vietnam when there are live-sighting investigations.

Shortly before President Clinton granted recognition to Hanoi, there was sabotage on the American end when some less-than-fawning investigators were about to go to Vietnam. Senator Tom Harkin



(D-IA), who first made a name for himself during the Vietnam War by blowing the whistle on “tiger cages” in South Vietnam, actually worked in conjunction with Hanoi to prevent Representative Dornan and a congressional staffer from traveling there. Harkin’s intervention caused Dornan and Paul Behrends, who works for Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and is on the staff of the International Relations Committee, to be bumped at the last minute from the delegation allowed into Vietnam. They had planned to follow up on reports of live Americans being held captive.

There remain in Washington pockets of resistance to the Clinton love-in with the captors of American military men. Nevertheless, any leverage with Hanoi over the issue of our men has been greatly diminished by the man who told his draft board in Hot Springs, Arkansas in the spring of 1969 that he should not have to go to Vietnam because he was “too well educated,” even while his countrymen were being tortured by the Reds. It has taken a while, but Bill Clinton may have written off the final hope that abandoned Americans might ever come home.