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No Thanks to Hanoi Just Yet

There has been a widespread spate of paeans and ringing expressions of relief concerning Hanoi's supposed new candor on the MIA issue. Is it time to give the devil his due? Well, the Vietnamese communist regime for several months has been quietly releasing on an accelerated scale more of the type of information it has allowed to trickle out over the years about American GIs missing or captured during the Vietnam War. In this case, a researcher named Ted Schweitzer — who has long roots in Indochina — was the funnel for the 4,800 photographs so dramatically revealed just before the U.S. elections. President Bush then announced that “Hanoi has agreed to provide us with all — and I repeat, all — information they have collected on American POWs and MIAs. This includes photographs, artifacts, detailed records on Americans who fell into Vietnam's hands.” Calling the developments a “significant breakthrough,” the President indicated in a late October Rose Garden ceremony: “Today, finally, I am convinced that we can begin writing the last chapter in the Vietnam War.”

Hanoi's “Cooperation”

In fact, the thousands of photographs, which have proven to be of very limited assistance thus far, according to officials, were not a direct part of that announced “agreement,” and have been undergoing analysis for some time. It remains to be seen what this alleged complete cooperation will bring.

The release of the photographs from Hanoi — some of the voluminous evidence whose existence the Vietnamese communists have denied for two decades — seems to confirm the deaths of four Americans previously listed as missing. Families of those identified in the photos have been notified, the Defense Department reports. The Pentagon also says it is trying to identify a few others from the pictures.

This is the Pentagon's breakdown of the 4,800 photographs: After eliminating duplicates, there are 1,800, and of these the Pentagon already had copies of 600. Of the 1,200 or so left, some 700 are of crash sites, with few showing personnel. There are 272 photos of live POWs, almost all group shots of GIs in prison camps during the war — such as those brought back from Vietnam by Senator John McCain (R-AZ), a former POW and member of the delegation that went to Hanoi in October. These pictures include 178 of Americans; of these, 160 have been identified as known prisoners by the United States. Two of these died in captivity, with their remains having been returned, while the other 158 came back in prisoner exchanges. The 61 photos of bodies at crash sites include 31 individuals; of these, 23 had been previously identified (the remains of 12 having been returned earlier), six had been listed as “killed in action, body not recovered,” while five were earlier listed as MIA.

As might be expected, none of the evidence from Hanoi thus far indicates that Americans GIs



survived the war in communist captivity. These photos have apparently allowed U.S. authorities to resolve a tiny number of “discrepancy cases,” of individuals known to have been alive at one time in enemy territory or captivity. The special emissary for POW-MIA affairs, General John Vessey, has said for years that Vietnam had the capability of resolving in short order hundreds of such cases.

The archives of the Vietnam Museum of the People’s Army may show more. Or it may not. Senator John Kerry (D-MA), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on POW and MIA Affairs, stated in Los Angeles that he had no idea whether information would be forthcoming on live Americans in Vietnam, but suggested: “I kind of think it’s not related to that as much as it’s related to people who have died.”

It would seem premature to throw too many accolades in the direction of Hanoi for what it has done thus far. Quite the opposite, we would contend. What the Vietnamese Reds have proven is that they have been manipulative and deceitful for almost 20 years, inflicting cruelty on families in the U.S. in another version of the tortures with which they seem particularly adept.

The Payoff

The Bush Administration has already offered some limited rewards, including flood relief funds and health assistance. What the Vietnamese want even more is an end to the trade embargo which has been held against them since 1975, and for the U.S. to stop inhibiting the World Bank and International Monetary Fund from opening its purse strings. While President Bush indicates that diplomatic relations by the end of the year may be pushing matters, it is obvious that Washington is leaning in that direction. As Mr. Bush put it: “I’d like to see full relations. I’d like to see that nation become democratic and fit into ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and come along in the future.”

Did Hanoi feel it could strike a better deal with George Bush than with Bill Clinton? Perhaps. But the Establishment that runs so much of U.S. foreign policy is “above” partisan considerations — which frequently has meant that “conservative” administrations are given the job of making such “breakthroughs” with hard-liners such as Red China, the Palestine Liberation Organization, or Vietnam. Keep in mind also that the U.S. has made an open book to Vietnam of our own knowledge about what prisoners they might hold. Thus, by setting a low-end goal such as clearing up “discrepancy” cases, we make it easy for Vietnam to account for the dead. Any living now, or those left behind alive, become obstacles to business.

Phony Alternatives

Concerning such business, false alternatives are presented. On the one hand, we are told that for competitive reasons the U.S. must somehow outflank Japan in obtaining business in Vietnam; oil is high on the agenda. Others pushing for a new world order and normalization of relations with Hanoi say that Tokyo would like nothing better than for us to open the doors to the West. Japan, reported the **Wall Street Journal** for October 26th, “has worked behind the scenes to urge Hanoi to be more forthcoming with the United States. Tokyo also has told Washington of its eagerness to normalize relations with Hanoi, beginning with the release of Japanese aid for Vietnam that has



been stuck in the pipeline for a decade. The Japanese are frustrated by the failure of the U.S. and Vietnam to resolve their differences.”

Those “differences” are called American servicemen — who swore to stand by their country. Will their country stand by them?

There is more at stake, as the **Journal** reminds those concerned about matters other than flesh, blood, and honor: “U.S. companies look on Vietnam, with its population of 70 million, as a rich market for consumer products and such other exports as earth-moving equipment, which will be needed to build Vietnam’s infrastructure.”

The letting of contracts in the South China Sea is something that Hanoi would just love to provide for American companies. Or so one gathers from the United States-Vietnam Trade Council, whose director Virginia Foote has warned: “If Vietnam awards those blocks [of offshore oil concessions], that will pretty much be the end of the American role in development of the Vietnamese oil industry.”

One wonders what the policy of the international oil companies might be when more “boat people” in their rickety craft drift by those drilling rigs.

Even before the election, John McAuliff, director of the U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project, told the **New York Times** that the “interregnum period” for either Clinton or Bush could be used “for responding appropriately to the Vietnamese, to the legitimate pressures from American business and to pressure from our allies to cease using trade and the lending organizations as clubs to hit the Vietnamese for political reasons.”

Left Behind

Speaking of clubbing, consider the dramatic recent testimony before the Senate POW-MIA committee by retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Donald Odell, who told the panel about how he was tortured by Cuban communists in Hanoi’s camps. By his and other accounts, Castro’s hoods were even more brutal than the Vietnamese — which is saying something. For refusing to sign a confession of war crimes, said the colonel, “They hit me with a rifle butt in the base of my neck and fractured the fifth vertebra. I was paralyzed from the waist down [and] had little use of my arms and hands Luckily, they didn’t sever the spinal cord.” Odell credits a cellmate, who had been a physical therapist in civilian life, with extensive rehabilitation which allowed him to walk again, but only after a long six months.

Moreover, the former POW described two prisoners held in the same compound with him who were so “severely tortured” by the Cubans they were not returned to the U.S. “The Vietnamese didn’t want the world to see what they had done to them,” the colonel said. One man was in such a state of mental collapse, he recalled, he had to be force-fed. “They were broken men. The Vietnamese knew they couldn’t survive by themselves. I don’t really believe they’d be permitted to live.”

The colonel indicated that he had reported these facts upon his return to the United States. One of these prisoners, said Odell, has since been declared dead by the U.S. government and his remains



were reportedly returned. But the other is still listed as MIA. “Prior to our release, they were taken away from us [in 1973] and placed in solitary confinement.” Odell went on to say, “I think there’s a good chance that other POWs ... were not released for the same reason.”

Yet, as Select Committee vice chairman Bob Smith (R-NH) pointed out, this seems to contradict the statement of a 1989 interagency report on POW/MIAs that contended that “returnees at Operation Homecoming in 1973 knew of no Americans who were left behind in captivity.” In a memo to chairman John Kerry, Smith observed further that “cables from April 1973 indicate that returning POWs knew of 156 who ‘may have died in captivity.’” The committee, recommended Senator Smith, should “determine the accuracy of this statement” about none being abandoned and whether “it was the returnees or the government that stated the 156 persons ‘may have died in captivity.’”

At the time of the Paris peace accords, a number of top Americans — some even now in the highest ranks of government — knew that men had been left behind without a proper accounting. Indeed, Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson wrote as much to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger (basing his letter on information from now Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, who was then Richardson’s acting assistant secretary of defense). Said Richardson in a memo dated March 28, 1973, “Hanoi should be advised unequivocally that we still hold them responsible for the return of all POWs being held in Indochina,” which included 350 missing in Laos, since most of that country was then controlled by Hanoi, not Vientiane. Moreover, said Richardson, the Pathet Lao “should be told that we know they hold U.S. prisoners.” Those men did not return.

Recent Testimony

Recent testimony by other former Nixon defense secretaries James Schlesinger and Melvin Laird also indicated that they thought the U.S. government left behind men when Indochina was abandoned. Laird stressed that some of the best information came in letters from POWs to their stateside families which indicated to analysts that there were large numbers of POWs (more than 470) that had not been on any of the lists provided by Hanoi.

On March 29, 1973, President Nixon announced boldly to the nation that “all of our American POWs are on their way home,” but he also alluded to problem areas in accounting for MIAs. Two days after that speech, the Defense Department was still listing 81 men on the “current captured” list, and even in May of that year — after allowing for information gleaned from those who had returned — 72 were still carried in the “current captured” category. The service secretaries, in fact, at the time wanted to *add* up to 75 cases to that current captured list, but that was denied by Deputy Defense Secretary William Clements, according to a deposition by Clements taken by the current POW-MIA committee. Clements himself, in a memo to the President on July 17, 1973, pointed out that of the 1,278 unaccounted for, “67 are officially listed as Prisoner of War based on information that they reached the ground safely and were captured.” Said Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) in floor remarks on October 5th, this bald statement “sums it up better than I could. It’s as obvious as the smell of manure in the springtime in Iowa.”



Henry Kissinger, in his testimony this past September, manifested fury that anyone would believe the U.S. “knowingly” left POWs behind. Yet, he also admitted that “I can’t let it stand that we did not know they were holding POWs. We knew. We had inadequate accounting for the missing in action....”

Kissinger bristled when Senator Kerry asked why bombing was not threatened at that time to force the return of our men. As a matter of fact, the Senate in 1973 actually voted to cut off all such authority for the President to threaten Hanoi. This was despite the fact that, as Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) told his colleagues in 1973, “a goodly number of these MIAs may be in Cambodia and Laos, with at least 300 in Laos alone.”

In the face of all the above, and much more, the Senate Select Committee was misled by Bush Administration officials as recently as last year, investigators and others on the staff feel. According to the investigators, a top State Department representative, for example, whose testimony was backed up by ranking officials from the Defense Department and Defense Intelligence Agency, last year indicated that “he was not aware of any judgment at any time in the executive branch that there were Americans left behind in Laos or Cambodia.”

Signs on the Ground

There are distressing indications that the Defense Intelligence Agency continues with its long-standing policy of trying to debunk any information that would show evidence of live American prisoners. Symbols picked up by satellite have long held intriguing clues that they may have been placed there by our men. For example, in a case cited by Senator Grassley, there was a four-digit number cut into a rice paddy in the mid-1980s which matches a classified authenticator number of a known MIA. But when officials of the Joint Services Search, Evasion, Rescue and Escape Agency saw photographs they considered credible of such digital indicators — of which they found 19 — the DIA “hammered the JSSA guys to change their story, and all the 19 have become shadows on the ground,” according to a source. Actually, as Senators Smith and Grassley point out, the intelligence analysts would be hard-pressed to find signals that prisoners might be using because they were never briefed on the indicators which JSSA trainers had taught to pilots.

There were sets of symbols detected in Laos that even the DIA couldn’t explain away in recent testimony — a message found in the Plain of Jars in 1973 and another that was discovered as recently as January 1988. The second symbol was picked up by surveillance apparently accidentally (it says “USA” in 12-foot letters with what is called a “Walking K” nearby, the latter a distress signal for downed pilots) in a field near Sam Neua in Laos. According to assistant defense secretary Duane Andrews, the latter symbols were not even analyzed by the Pentagon until 11 months after their discovery. Incredibly, the official surmised that they were likely etched into the ground by people other than American POWs.

Senator Grassley has noted that even as the committee’s charter is coming to its end, the CIA has given them access to but a fraction of its pertinent files. “We reviewed only 20 out of 90 boxes of materials we have identified at the National Security Agency. DoD has not provided access to all of



its documents. The military services, most notably the Navy, have been uncooperative in varying degrees.”

Has there been a breakthrough on the POW/MIA issue? Progress, perhaps. But breakthrough? Not by a long shot!