

McCain and the POW Cover-up

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John McCain, who has risen to political prominence on his image as a Vietnam POW war hero, has, inexplicably, worked very hard to hide from the public stunning information about American prisoners in Vietnam who, unlike him, didn't return home. Throughout his Senate career, McCain has quietly sponsored and pushed into federal law a set of prohibitions that keep the most revealing information about these men buried as classified documents. Thus the war hero people would logically imagine to be a determined crusader for the interests of POWs and their families became instead the strange champion of hiding the evidence and closing the books.

Almost as striking is the manner in which the mainstream press has shied from reporting the POW story and McCain's role in it, even as McCain has made his military service and POW history the focus of his presidential campaign. Reporters who had covered the Vietnam War have also turned their heads and walked in other directions. McCain doesn't talk about the missing men, and the press never asks him about them.

The sum of the secrets McCain has sought to hide is not small. There exists a telling mass of official documents, radio intercepts, witness depositions, satellite photos of rescue symbols that pilots were trained to use, electronic messages from the ground containing the individual code numbers given to airmen, a rescue mission by a Special Forces unit that was aborted twice by Washington and even sworn testimony by two defense secretaries that "men were left behind." This imposing body of evidence suggests that a large number--probably hundreds--of the US prisoners held in Vietnam were not returned when the peace treaty was signed in January 1973 and Hanoi released 591 men, among them Navy combat pilot John S. McCain.

The Pentagon had been withholding significant information from POW families for years. What's more, the Pentagon's POW/MIA operation had been publicly shamed by internal whistleblowers and POW families for holding back documents as part of a policy of "debunking" POW intelligence even when the information was obviously credible. The pressure from the families and Vietnam veterans finally produced the creation, in late 1991, of a Senate "Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs." The chair was John Kerry, but McCain, as a POW, was its most pivotal member. In the end, the committee became part of the debunking machine.

Included in the evidence that McCain and his government allies suppressed or tried to discredit is a transcript of a senior North Vietnamese general's briefing of the Hanoi Politburo, discovered in Soviet archives by an American scholar in the 1990s. The briefing took place only four months before the 1973 peace accords. The general, Tran Van Quang, told the Politburo members that Hanoi was holding 1,205 American prisoners but would keep many of them at war's end as leverage to ensure getting reparations from Washington.

Throughout the Paris negotiations, the North Vietnamese tied the prisoner issue tightly to the issue of reparations. Finally, in a February 1, 1973, formal letter to Hanoi's premier, Pham Van Dong, Nixon pledged \$3.25 billion in "postwar reconstruction" aid. The North Vietnamese, though, remained skeptical about the reparations promise being honored (it never was). Hanoi thus held back prisoners--just as it had done when the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and withdrew their forces from Vietnam. France later paid ransoms for prisoners and brought them home.

Two defense secretaries who served during the Vietnam War testified to the Senate POW committee in September 1992 that prisoners were not returned. James Schlesinger and Melvin Laird, secretaries of defense under Nixon, said in a public session and under oath that they based their conclusions on strong intelligence data--letters, eyewitness reports, even direct radio contacts. Under questioning, Schlesinger chose his words carefully, understanding clearly the volatility of the issue: "I think that as of now that I can come to no other conclusion...some were left behind."

Furthermore, over the years, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) received more than 1,600 firsthand reports of sightings of live American prisoners and nearly 14,000 secondhand accounts. Many witnesses interrogated by CIA or Pentagon intelligence agents were deemed "credible" in the agents' reports. Some of the witnesses were given lie-detector tests and passed. Sources provided me with copies of these witness reports. Yet the DIA, after reviewing them all, concluded that they "do not constitute evidence" that men were still alive.

There is also evidence that in the first months of Reagan's presidency, the White House received a ransom proposal for a number of POWs being held by Hanoi. The offer, which was passed to Washington from an official of a third country, was apparently discussed at a meeting in the Roosevelt Room attended by Reagan, Vice President George H.W. Bush, CIA director William Casey and National Security Adviser Richard Allen. Allen confirmed the offer in sworn testimony to the Senate POW committee on June 23, 1992.

Allen was allowed to testify behind closed doors, and no information was released. But a *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter, Robert Caldwell, obtained the portion of the testimony relating to the ransom offer and wrote about it. The ransom request was for \$4 billion, Allen testified. He said he told Reagan that "it would be worth the president going along and let's have the negotiation." When his testimony appeared in the *Union-Tribune*, Allen quickly wrote a letter to the panel, this time not under oath, recanting the ransom story, saying his memory had played tricks on him.

But the story didn't end there. A Treasury agent on Secret Service duty in the White House, John Syphrit, came forward to say he had overheard part of the ransom conversation in the Roosevelt Room in 1981. The Senate POW committee voted not to subpoena him to testify.

On November 11, 1992, Dolores Alfond, sister of missing airman Capt. Victor Apodaca and chair of the National Alliance of Families, an organization of relatives of POW/MIAs, testified at one of the Senate committee's public hearings. She asked for information about data the government had gathered from electronic devices used in a classified program known as PAVE SPIKE.

The devices were primarily motion sensors, dropped by air, designed to pick up enemy troop movements. But they also had rescue capabilities. Someone on the ground--a downed airman or a prisoner on a labor gang--could manually enter data into the sensor, which were regularly collected electronically by US planes flying overhead. Alfond stated, without any challenge from the committee, that in 1974, a year after the supposedly complete return of prisoners, the gathered data showed that a person or people had manually entered into the sensors--as US pilots had been trained to do--"no less than 20 authenticator numbers that corresponded exactly to the classified authenticator numbers of 20 US POW/MIAs who were lost in Laos." Alfond added, says the transcript: "This PAVE SPIKE intelligence is seamless, but the committee has not discussed it or released what it knows about PAVE SPIKE."

McCain, whose POW status made him the committee's most powerful member, attended that hearing specifically to confront Alford because of her criticism of the panel's work. He bellowed and berated her for quite a while. His face turning anger-pink, he accused her of "denigrating" his "patriotism." The bullying had its effect--she began to cry.

After a pause Alford recovered and tried to respond to his scorching tirade, but McCain simply turned and stormed out of the room. The PAVE SPIKE file has never been declassified. We still don't know anything about those 20 POWs.

The committee's final report, issued in January 1993, began with a forty-three-page executive summary--the only section that drew the mainstream press's attention. It said that only "a small number" of POWs could have been left behind in 1973. But the document's remaining 1,180 pages were quite different. Sprinkled throughout are findings that contradict and disprove the conclusions of the whitewashed summary. This insertion of critical evidence that committee leaders had downplayed and dismissed was the work of a committee staff that had opposed and finally rebelled against the cover-up.

Pages 207-209 of the report, for example, contain major revelations of what were either massive intelligence failures or bad intentions. These pages say that until the committee brought up the subject in 1992, no branch of the intelligence community that dealt with analysis of satellite and lower-altitude photos had ever been informed of the distress signals US forces were trained to use in Vietnam--nor had they ever been tasked to look for such signals from possible prisoners on the ground.

About Sydney H. Schanberg

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