Paying the Dane-geld

by Warren P. Mass

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On January 24, 1973 Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's chief negotiator on Vietnam, held a news briefing in Washington to explain the cease-fire accord he had initialed in Paris the previous day. Families of those servicemen captured by the Communists or missing-in-action waited anxiously to learn what fate would befall their loved ones; some had been waiting since 1964.

"The return of American personnel and the accounting of missing-in-action is unconditional and will take place within the same time frame as the American withdrawals," promised Kissinger. "[A]ll American prisoners will, of course, be released within 60 days of the signing of the agreement [January 27]."

A total of 591 Americans held prisoner in North and South Vietnam were released, but disturbing reports of Americans left behind began to surface. Government figures at the time of the agreement listed six Americans captured and 315 missing in Laos. Later, Air Force figures showed 569 Americans lost in Laos, with 311 never accounted for. A CIA *Intelligence Information Cable* dated "1 December 1970" and declassified in 1978 cited as many as 68 American POWs being housed in Laotian camps. Another U.S. government report dated "5 March 1973" quoted a Pathet Lao prisoner as having observed three Americans held in Laos.

In spite of the Pathet Laos' admission that they were holding Americans, and the live-sightings of specific POWs held by the Pathet Lao, the U.S. Government never demanded the return of POWs from Laos; instead, it declared them dead.

Representative Robert C. Smith (R-NH), who has seen hundreds of classified POW reports, told THE NEW AMERICAN a year ago: "I am convinced that there are live Americans over there. I think the evidence is conclusive. I've said a number of times that if the American people could ever see those live-sighting reports sitting classified in the Pentagon, they would be utterly outraged."

Even considering the no-win policies that prevailed throughout the Vietnam era, one wonders, why did this added outrage of abandoned POWs take place?

The most plausible explanation is simply the moral deterioration of our leadership, which was itself a reflection of what was happening in our society at large. Most wars have an adverse affect on public morality; the influence of Vietnam, the nation's longest war, was all the worse. But something more was at work than the natural social disintegration that accompanies wars: a deliberate, organized campaign of demoralization was waged throughout the Vietnam era. This Communist-inspired cultural revolution attacked all traditional values — which are based upon God, family, and country — and substituted, instead, a "counter culture," emphasizing hedonistic life styles such as sexual promiscuity, illegal drug use, and perversion. (The "me generation" of the '80s was simply an extension of this selfish attitude, minus the anti-war agitation.)

This decade-long attack on the virtues associated with individual responsibility had fostered a "cut-and-run" attitude among the general populace by the War's end. Our nation simply washed its hands of POWs, MIAs, Vietnamese refugees, and Vietnam veterans alike.

By 1973, the faltering Nixon Administration had begun to reap what it had sown. The fickle mass media, which had heaped lavish praise upon Nixon for drinking toasts with Communist tyrants in Peking in 1972, wished to impeach him for the comparative misdemeanor of Watergate. Nixon wanted to get out of Vietnam as painlessly (for him) as possible; as for the POWs, they are still feeling the pain. In a move that prefigured his later role in overseeing the Iran arms-for-hostages deal, Kissinger aide Robert McFarlane went to Hanoi to offer $100 million in emergency medical aid to the North Vietnamese to try to buy our way out of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese demanded the $3.25 billion promised to them earlier and refused to accept the lesser amount or to release any more POWs. Knowing that Congress would not grant any more funds to North Vietnam, the Nixon Administration did not stand up for the POWs, but took the coward's way out and left the Americans to rot — and their families to suffer the anguish of not knowing their fate.

If there is a moral to this story, it is perhaps told best by Rudyard Kipling, in his classic poem "The Dane-geld." The Danegeld was an annual tax first levied in 991 by Ethelred the Unready (an excellent nickname for our present leaders!) to buy off the Danish invaders of his kingdom. The third and fourth stanzas of Kipling's six-stanza poem read:

> It is always a temptation
> to a rich and lazy nation,
> To puff and look important and to say:
> "Though we know we should defeat you,
> we have not the time to meet you.
>
> We will therefore pay you cash to go away."
> And that is called paying the Dane-geld;
> But we've proved it again and again,
> That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld
> You never get rid of the Dane.

And that is one reason our POWs have not been brought home: Our leaders would rather pay the Dane-geld (or Redgeld, or Ayatollah-geld) than cultivate courage, morality, and conviction. If we want to correct this situation, we will have to develop these virtues in ourselves, and insist upon them in our leaders. Until we learn that we cannot buy respect, that we must earn it, the life of every American abroad, whether soldier or civilian, will be in jeopardy.