Written by **William P. Hoar**

Reprinted with permission from The New American, January 1994

POWs and Truth Held Ransom

The Men We Left Behind: Henry Kissinger, the Politics of Deceit and the Tragic Fate of POWs After the Vietnam War, by Mark Sauter and Jim Sanders, Bethesda, MD: National Press Books, 1993, 394 pages, hardcover.

Authors Mark Sauter and Jim Sanders open up what Senator John Kerry (D-MA) and his accomplices in both parties tried to cover up in the latest congressional investigation of American prisoners and missing in Southeast Asia. The authors, experienced reporters in this field, demonstrate that many top U.S. and Vietnamese officials share a dirty secret: Both Washington and Hanoi know that U.S. fighting men were left behind after the fighting ended. In addition, both sides know what the fates of many of those servicemen were, and have long been aware of the other side's camouflaging lies.

Is there cynicism amid the research and analysis? Yes. And, indeed, there should be rancor. The bureaucracy, the authors maintain, "is determined to bury these last troublesome individuals who don't have the decency to just quietly die, so the U.S. can recognize Vietnam, lift the embargo and get on with drilling oil wells and building hotels."

A Repeated Pattern

Although ***The Men We Left Behind*** is concerned with the POW/MIAs of the Vietnam War, the history of how the communists have treated such prisoners in the past — and how the West has acquiesced in their captivity — is noted as well. This includes many held by the Soviets after World War II as well as men abandoned after the Korean War. There has been recent testimony, confirmed by multiple sources, of how hundreds of American prisoners of war who had been kept in Red Chinese and North Korean camps were sent to Siberia after the Korean War. Former White House intelligence officer Philip Corso has testified that President Eisenhower knew about these men, but declined even to make their plight public.

Former POW Mike Benge is quoted by the authors as recounting the grim threats that the Vietnamese made to him. "We're still holding French POWs," the Reds told Benge, "and we're going to do the same thing to you if you don't cooperate." Benge, however, made it back, and has kept faith by remaining active in trying to get other Americans freed.

Others were not so fortunate. Having learned from their conflict with the French, and from the experience of fellow communists during the Korean War, Hanoi was not about to give up its leverage without garnering some return. Subsequent evidence, and even admissions from Moscow, have proven beyond quibble this pattern of the Reds' holding captured men in order to exert diplomatic and military pressure. Yet, who was placed in charge, on the American side, of the "investigations" of such missing POWs? As the authors say, in many cases "the very men who

dissembled about the World War II and Korea POWs are in charge of locating Vietnam POWs."

One of the inside accounts broken by Sauter and Sanders in ***The Men We Left Behind*** is of a Rand Corporation study which predicted with extreme accuracy how Hanoi would treat the issue of POWs. Portions of the study, which was commissioned in 1968 and revised the following year, are apparently still classified. American diplomatic agents, including Henry Cabot Lodge and Henry Kissinger, were to find how prescient the Rand study really was in their dealings across negotiating tables. Many hundreds of Americans suffered the lessons firsthand, in bamboo cages and behind bars.

For example, among the conclusions of Rand's ***Prisoners of War in Indochina*** was that the U.S. could "avoid the appearance of paying reparations or ransom money" if it could reach an agreement with the communists "in private, and if all funds paid out to Hanoi were then publicly labeled part of the U.S. contribution to a postwar recovery period." Regardless of how one feels about paying "reparations," by whatever label, Kissinger did offer Hanoi billions and kept the matter from Congress for years.

The Rand study, written by Indochina expert Anita Lauve Nutt, further foresaw what would happen four years later: "No matter what terms are agreed upon, it would be unduly optimistic" to believe that the communists "will release all U.S. prisoners immediately after conclusion of an agreement in the expectation that the United States will meet its military, political or monetary commitments. More likely, they will insist on awaiting concrete evidence of U.S. concessions before releasing the majority of American prisoners, and *will retain some of them until all U.S. commitments have been fulfilled"* (emphasis added). Recent discoveries from the files of Soviet military intelligence in Moscow indicate that American men were indeed retained after Operation Homecoming in 1973.

Ransom and Reparations

Even now, the U.S. government does not acknowledge that firm promises were made about reparations to Hanoi. Yet, Sauter and Sanders, in their digging through previously classified material, argue convincingly that this is just what happened. Even Le Duc Tho admitted that North Vietnam expected to get reparations before all American servicemen were returned. The terms, which Sauter and Sanders say had no strings attached, were for $3.25 billion. Up to an additional $1.5 billion was to be negotiated later.

The supposed "peace with honor" didn't occur before the 1972 election. But after the election came the so-called Christmas bombing during which, in the words of a Kissinger aide, "we bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concession." Subsequently, the investigation of "Watergate" fell upon the White House in earnest. So despite the fact that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and intelligence agencies expected to get many more prisoners of war returned (the JCS told Kissinger several days after the accord was signed that they were hoping for "40 or 41" from Laos) the announcement was made that all had been returned even though officials knew that men the Reds held did not come back.

Indeed, Kissinger and company helped hide the fact that Americans were held back essentially as

hostages, and did not inform Congress or the American public that aid had been promised to Hanoi. “In the end,” assert the authors, “rather than pay for unrepatriated U.S. POWs, the Nixon Administration chose to deny their existence.”

Future Administrations, seeing that a “hostage crisis” would be created if they raised the issue publicly, chose to keep the matter under wraps. Even during the last Senate probe of the POW/MIA issue, in the Bush Administration, Henry Kissinger was allowed to help rewrite the history to protect his image.

Secret Camp System

The authors also examine the considerable evidence that the North Vietnamese established a separate system for certain prisoners who were held back, as distinguished from the camps housing those who returned in 1973, though the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) still maintains this was not the case. Yet, the communists had done this after World War II and during the Korean War, and the proofs are compelling that it happened in Vietnam as well. Radio transmissions and countless refugee testimonies, well after the war, bear out this conclusion — not to mention the intelligence information in the hands of U.S. agencies that was kept even from the families of the missing.

Of course the DIA and other authorities in Washington have known better. Indeed, DIA itself has a firsthand witness, a former high-ranking Czechoslovak officer named Jan Sejna, who confirms that Hanoi sent Moscow some of its captured prizes. (***Conservative Review*** magazine for November/December 1993 has more on this man, in an article by his private debriefer, Joseph Douglass Jr., including evidence of medical experimentation done on American captives from the Korean and Vietnam Wars.)

Speaking of Sejna, the authors point out that even while DIA was saying no Americans were ever sent to Soviet authorities, the agency had in “its employ a man who claims he helped run a communist program that shipped scores of American prisoners from Vietnam to the Soviet Union. And that DIA employee isn’t some lowly clerk. He is said to be the top communist military officer ever to defect to the United States. In addition, the man has a highly sensitive DIA job as an expert on Warsaw Pact tactics and has passed several polygraph tests proving his honesty and loyalty to the U.S.”

One wonders how many top DIA officers, geared to covering up, could pass the same test. Sejna was treated shabbily by the Senate Committee and his deposition was classified.

Even exclusive of the existence of a secret prison system, there is convincing evidence that men were captured alive who did not come home, and that Washington is keeping this betrayal hidden. Consider Air Force pilot Robert Craner, who endured more than five years in captivity and was assigned to be a “memory bank” of the names and other vital information of POWs with whom he came into contact while in the Vietnamese camps. His debriefer upon returning to the states was a career military intelligence officer named John Halachis.

Some 50 to 60 names that Craner memorized were neither returned nor accounted for by the

Vietnamese communists. "'Some were just taken, some were taken off away for disciplinary reasons, for a variety of reasons. Some were considered by the camp guards [to be] high risk for escape,' he says.

"For each of the 50-60 named POWs, Halachis filed a report that contained all information stored in Craner's memory. But none of Craner's names were released by the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs. Presumably, they remain in classified Senate or Pentagon files."

Covering Their Tails?

The military establishment, similar to other bureaucracies but perhaps more so, fosters the goal of covering one's tail. Desk-bound warriors become extremely adept at this. In ***The Men We Left Behind***, there are countless examples of this procedure at work, from inconvenient evidence becoming conveniently misplaced, to jobs lost if one strayed from the line about no POWS having been left behind, to probable violations of the law concerning domestic surveillance of Americans who didn't believe that line.

No one doubts the status quo is tough to unhinge. But it is hard to blame inertia for all of what the authors cite as "criminal" behavior.

After producing substantial evidence that conspiring was ongoing for years to keep this issue concealed, the authors conclude (as they did in a previous book) that there was no widespread conspiracy involved. Perhaps this conclusion, disappointing as it may be, is intended to show how cautious the authors are.

Nonetheless, the book is still of inestimable value for its assemblage of facts in an area where Sauter and Sanders are proven experts. This is, as we know, an area where tough digging is required, and these two have been yeomen in the job of excavation.

There are heavy forces at work. Sauter and Sanders ask us to think of the matter this way: "What do George Bush, the ***New York Times***, Warren Christopher, CBS, Brent Scowcroft, the ***Washington Post***, Senator John Kerry and top Pentagon and State Department bureaucrats in the Clinton Administration all have in common? Their reputations will be damaged, and in some cases devastated, if living U.S. POWs return from communist control." Those are indeed formidable barricades to overcome.

On the other hand, there is faith. And the power of exposure. In short, there is the truth.