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President Bush to POW/MIA Families:"Shut Up and Sit Down!"

The dam is beginning to crack badly, and a flood of hitherto concealed intelligence about Americans who were long held by the communists — some undoubtedly alive until at least very recently and who may still be held — is bursting forth. The brutality of communists is well-documented. But would Americans ditch their best, and then deny knowledge of them? Yes. Deplorably, it is clear that, in the Vietnam War as in previous conflicts, top-ranking American officials knew our men were captives and left them to decompose a bit at a time, for decades on end.

As a partial declassification has been forced upon the U.S. government, the evidence of collusion has mounted. Former Representative Billy Hendon of North Carolina, an expert on the issue who is very familiar with the files, is now able to speak freely about what they show. In late July, at a convention of the National Alliance of Families held outside Washington, DC, Hendon noted that one of the internal reviews of U.S. handling of POWs and MIAs was blatant enough to prove that a "conspiracy" was involved, a conclusion that should shock no one familiar with the facts. A memorandum written by a Navy admiral, said Hendon, spoke of how in the early 1980s the North Carolinian and a few of his congressional colleagues were creating big problems because they knew what was in the files. So the POW team in the Pentagon simply decided to "damage limit" the congressmen.

Clear Conspiracy

Hendon recalled the memo as noting that those on the inside of the Pentagon needed to get together with New York congressmen such as Stephen Solarz and Ben Gilman, who held influential committee positions. "Read that memorandum," challenged Hendon, and everybody who thinks those who "believe there is a conspiracy are a little bit wacky" will be convinced otherwise. It is a "clear conspiracy on the part of the Executive Branch" to cover up, said Hendon. "It can be nothing else."

Little wonder President Bush took some verbal flak that same weekend when he addressed another convention of POW families, that of the National League of Families, at their convention held in another nearby hotel outside Washington. The ruckus was given front-page newspaper coverage and network television play. The National League, it must be emphasized, is a group that has been widely reproached for accepting without criticism every unlikely finding of successive Administrations. Despite mountains of evidence in the other direction, it is the group that is seemingly under so much control that it has taken an *official* position rejecting conspiracy and cover-up.

In his controversial resignation letter charging a cover-up, Colonel Millard Peck, who in 1991 stepped down as chief of the Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, concluded that the National League's director Ann Mills Griffiths is in "the perfect position to clamor for 'progress,' while intentionally impeding the effort." Obviously, however, not all in the League buy the party line. In any event, at the League convention, Mr. Bush was met by the frustrated loved ones of MIAs who demanded the full truth.

Men Were Left Behind

Testimony and other evidence before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs has led even liberal Chairman Senator John Kerry (D-MA) to conclude that more than a hundred Americans who were known to have been alive in enemy hands were left behind in Vietnam. And the U.S. government, which knew more than it admitted, simply lied.

Actually, Kerry's numbers are very low. In his revealing book ***The Bamboo Cage***, British author Nigel Cawthorne noted that at the time of Operation Homecoming in 1973, U.S. officials "were expecting another 400 to 500 men — Air Force, Navy and Marine fliers that they had good reason to believe had survived being shot down and who were subsequently captured."

As far back as 1981, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, General Eugene Tighe, testified before Congress about Americans being forsaken. In 1986, Tighe again concluded: "A large volume of evidence leads to the conclusion that POWs are still alive." Tighe, from his unique vantage point, had determined that between 92 and 97 percent of the refugee reports were accurate. The DIA itself, however, has put out the line that no sightings can be confirmed. When Tighe came to his conclusions, Hendon recalls what happened to the general: They "bugged his office," they "made him change his report, and they marked it. secret" until it was dug out by Senator Bob Smith (R-NH) and other probers on the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs.

There have been some startling developments in recent weeks:

• A joint U.S.-Russian Commission on POWs revealed that — surprise! — the Soviets lied for 50 years or so. Even a spokesman for the U.S. State Department (which would not know an American interest if it saw one) admitted that "it was acknowledged that in spite of the assurances of all Soviet leaders from Khrushchev to Gorbachev that there were no Americans on the territory of the USSR, a preliminary study of documents attests to the fact that Americans were present on Soviet territory and that remains of Americans may still be present." The State Department was not really surprised by this, since it had reached this same conclusion long ago.

• Senator Bob Smith learned from Russian intelligence that 125 servicemen from the Korean War who had been listed as presumed dead or missing were in fact survivors who had been handed over to KGB interrogators in North Korea, with some then sent to Communist China.

• The ***Los Angeles Times*** determined, from Defense Department evidence, that several dozen American prisoners from the Korean War were sent to Red China, where they were subjected to psychological and medical experimentation. A facility in the Manchurian city of Harbin was reportedly utilized for this, after which some were executed. Beijing naturally issued a denial.

• The Gaines report, named after Air Force Colonel Kimball Gaines — issued in 1986, and whose very existence was denied to the Congress by the Pentagon in 1990 — found that the POW/MIA program's data base was a "wasteland," that it was hurt by "unhealthy attitudes," and that its files were "unprofessional, sloppy, incomplete." Commented Gaines in the report, which is among those declassified, "It should be noted with trepidation that there are some 600 hearsay reports of live sightings backlogged in the division which have not had any evaluation." This means witnesses came forward with personal knowledge about Americans, testified (often under duress) to U.S. authorities about what they had heard and seen, and those hundreds of accounts were then figuratively tossed in the back of a drawer to gather dust.

• Testimony of an Army intelligence specialist has been given to the Senate Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, pointing out: "During the period June 1973 through July 1975, I personally saw, distributed and briefed high-ranking officers of the [Pentagon's] Joint Staff on intelligence reports, analyses and operations regarding the transfer of U.S. POWs and/or MIAs from the custody of North Vietnam or Laotian authorities through Soviet bloc nations, or directly into the USSR. Further, it was the considered opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the entire U.S. intelligence community, that at the conclusion of Operation Homecoming in 1973 there were an estimated 290 to 340 U.S. POWs and MIAs alive and held captive in Laos."

• Code-breakers for the National Security Agency, at long last allowed to testify, have officially revealed their inside knowledge about POWs being shipped to the Soviet Union.

Deplorable Track Record

Of course, the Vietnamese themselves have a long history of using POWs as bait (French soldiers came home long after they had supposedly died in their own Indochina war). Their behavior toward American prisoners was expected — and confirmed. There have been diverse live POW sightings clustered in specific locations, satellite photo evidence, testimony corroborated by polygraph, radio traffic intercepts, and a variety of other proofs gathered over the years.

Henry Kissinger himself knew of photographs, taken by the communists, of almost a score of live Americans who were neither repatriated nor otherwise accounted for. Kissinger admitted a decade ago: "We knew of at least 80 instances in which an American serviceman had been captured alive and had subsequently disappeared. The evidence consisted of either voice communications from the ground in advance of capture or photographs and names published by the communists."

Kissinger and Nixon were not the first to write off Americans. As long ago as 1955, for instance, President Dwight Eisenhower ordered the U.S. government to cover up the abduction of some 800 American Korean War POWs, reports Mark Sauter of the Tacoma, Washington ***Morning News Tribune***, an experienced hand in this area. This revelation came from retired Army Colonel Philip J. Corso, a former White House intelligence officer, and is "verified by a Senate investigator and U.S. intelligence documents."

This was not the first time Eisenhower was involved in a public deception over American prisoners of war in the hands of Moscow. A then-Secret Priority message signed by General Eisenhower on

May 19, 1945 to the Allied Supreme Headquarters stated that the "numbers of U.S. prisoners estimated in Russian control" was 25,000. Other Army documents dated May 1945 estimated the numbers at between 15,000 and 20,000. Yet the public position of the U.S. government on June 1, 1945 was that virtually all American GIs had been repatriated.

Now the Russians admit that they had kept Americans — even after we had been "allies" in World War II. (Almost 60,000 Japanese and Koreans were kept in the post WWII-Soviet Union, Moscow admitted in 1991; North Korea, after three decades, somehow found 15 more American bodies just this May.) Camps in Russia are now being examined. Yet, following Boris Yeltsin's admissions, the Bush Administration then said it wanted definite answers within weeks from the maw of communist intelligence. Whereupon, the U.S. man-on-the-scene in Moscow, Malcolm Toon, further set the stage for excuses, claiming Yeltsin had mis-spoken. Toon himself, after less than a week in the world's largest country, proclaimed his determination that there were no Americans being held there against their will.

Internal U.S. government documents acknowledge the official response for years has been to try to discredit such evidence. Outright erroneous stories were deliberately given to family members. But Moscow is expected at once to come clean.

The classified files on Vietnam after the war include reports about a complex called the "Citadel" in Hanoi where Americans were reportedly seen as late as 1984. A 1986 DIA report discovered "evidence that establishes the probability that live American personnel are still held captive in Laos and Vietnam." Then that report was altered. The current Senate committee's staff has concluded that Americans remained "in captivity in Vietnam and Laos as late as 1989," though that conclusion has not yet been officially released.

More Updating

After all these years, the developments are now coming relatively fast and furious. As Captain Eugene "Red" McDaniel of the American Defense Institute told THE NEW AMERICAN not long ago, where there used to be only an occasional story on POWs, each day of late brings new accounts. There has also been fallout from the recent conventions on POWs and MIAs.

As is her wont, following the protest at the National League of Families convention, executive director Ann Mills Griffiths came out in public support of President Bush. She ran a large advertisement, in the form of an open letter, in the July 29th ***Washington Post***, in which she apologized for the "rude and disrespectful behavior of a small but organized minority" that was "both undeserved and outrageous." Political motivations were insinuated in the letter, a charge declared to be "completely false" by a group of POW families and board members who not only disagreed with the apology, but said it was made "without the support and approval of all POW family members."

At virtually the same time that this apology was appearing (and more than a month after former Ambassador Malcolm Toon tried to squelch Russian reports about Americans being held), the newspaper ***Izvestia*** published an article in Moscow by General Dmitry Volkogonov, the Russian

co-chairman of the joint commission on POWs, who said that newly discovered intelligence documents had been “unearthed from the depths of the [KGB] archives, which were top-secret until just recently.” According to Volkogonov, the senior military advisor to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, 39 Americans whose names were of Russian, Belarussian, Ukrainian, or Lithuanian origin were imprisoned after World War II. Pressured to renounce their U.S. citizenship, the Americans who refused were jailed as spies, said the general; those who did renounce their citizenship were imprisoned anyway. “There is reason to believe that some of them are still alive and that they live on the territory of the former USSR,” wrote Volkogonov.

Proof from the Skies

Above we made reference to satellite photography. One such, a December 1980 picture that was in the possession of the Defense Intelligence Agency, had the message in Morse: “52 SOS POW K.” The letter “K” represents the secret designation that there is a U.S. Air Force pilot on the ground, alive, and in need of rescue. It was this photograph, said returned POW and retired Navy Captain Eugene “Red” McDaniel, who saw it when he was director for Navy Liaison for the U.S. House of Representatives, that turned him around on the issue of the missing. Until that time, recalled McDaniel in an interview with THE NEW AMERICAN, he was predisposed to believe all American military men had come home. The proofs became too overwhelming for that conclusion, and he has become tireless in his effort to bring about accountability.

Another even more recent photograph, which has been publicly referred to by Billy Hendon and others, clearly shows the letters “USA” and, underneath that, the letter “K” again. The Drug Enforcement Agency took this photo on January 22, 1988 as part of its search for opium fields. Nor does this photo stand alone, since there have been 91 reports filed concerning the area (Sam Neua in Laos), which have made references to POWs, from small groups up to groups of more than 100.

The Citadel, mentioned previously, is essentially Vietnam’s Pentagon, the headquarters of the People’s Army of Vietnam. Hendon, drawing on the available intelligence, knows where its underground facilities are located, with street locations and numbers of American POWs who have been seen by multiple sources. Beneath the Citadel, said the former lawmaker, there is “no question” in anyone’s mind who has read the intelligence report that “there’s a huge prison under there, and they had tons of Americans there from 1973 … all the way to ’88 in November.” The sources put it near Ly Nam De Street, right by the tomb of Ho Chi Minh where it had originally been built as a bomb shelter.

The Defense Intelligence Agency insists that every source who comes up with one of these reports is wrong or a liar. That is the DIA’s presupposition. In fact, as Billy Hendon has disclosed, on the official form used to report live sightings of prisoners, there is not even a place to check should it be proven that an American is indeed held captive. All the indicated places to check force the analyst to draw other conclusions.

In the various internal studies of how the POW issue was being handled, the Brooks, Gaines, and

Tighe reports all point to a lack of the simplest techniques in connection with live-sighting reports — in particular, mapping. Within hours after the first set of documents had been declassified, Billy Hendon showed the families of those missing what such a map looks like. Taking some 1,350 of the best reports, Hendon had prepared a map with pins representing each sighting and when it occurred. To be included the sighting had to be of multiple prisoners; none were included of men who may have stayed behind voluntarily. Each sighting must have been reported as being of confined Americans. The evidence of that map is striking. The Pentagon calls it the "clusters theory."

The extremely detailed reports — by witnesses who have frequently passed polygraph tests given them independently over a period of years, and who would have nothing to gain by lying — are impressive. That is, unless your orders are to believe nothing — not even "circumstantial evidence" sufficient to convict a murderer in a U.S. court of law. The same DIA whose internal critics have shown it to be so faulty says they are all lies. As Colonel Gaines commented in a report that was declassified in late July: "Intense effort is initially focused on veracity of sources with a view toward discrediting them. This penchant has overridden the seeking of the corroborative data necessary to support the sighting."

Shooting the Messenger

Strange becomes commonplace in this business. The well-publicized photo of three men that appeared last year on the cover of ***Newsweek*** has been recently debunked by the Pentagon, but the Pentagon's response is itself suspect. No publishing information is given for the "magazine" from which it was supposedly found in Cambodia, and it reportedly was not a magazine published in the Khmer language. Moreover, the families who knew the men best are not convinced and they have forensic specialists who back up their claim that those depicted are their relatives. Fingerprints accompanied the photograph, fingerprints which certainly could have been compared for authenticity with those on file with the military. Yet, those fingerprints and all copies in the hands of the U.S. government seem to have disappeared. Albro Lundy III, son of Air Force Major Albro Lundy, Jr., whose family believes him to be shown in the disputed photograph, told THE NEW AMERICAN that his father's fingerprints have now been confirmed destroyed. He was told this by DOD's Carl Ford, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs.

Were the destroyed fingerprints just another snafu? Reporter David Hendrix, who has long followed the POW issue for the Riverside County, California ***Press-Enterprise***, reports that the U.S. government has no idea how many fingerprints of MIAs might be missing from their records and does not intend to find out. Hendrix also claims to have uncovered a secret operation that relocated some missing Americans under new identities and that involved the cooperation of several foreign governments and sub-rosa aid to Vietnam. Some of the returnees, he believes, may have been deserters whose presence in and return from Southeast Asia (as in the case of Robert Garwood), if done normally, would have been too embarrassing, since both sides publicly were saying that there were no Americans there. Those involved, Hendrix contends, have shown more fear than almost anyone he has ever encountered. The Senate Committee has been

examining the evidence of such reports.

“Moscow Bound”

The Senate Committee has also recently heard from retired NSA intelligence crypto-linguist Terrell Minarcin, whose unit in 1981 was ordered to provide communications support for a rescue mission. Two years after that, Minarcin was ordered to look for live prisoners because the Soviets had asked Vietnam for slave laborers. Also in 1981, according to several published accounts, Vietnam is said to have offered live American POWs in return for $4 billion dollars. That is just about the amount that Henry Kissinger had secretly offered North Vietnam in reparations years before.

Jerry Mooney, a retired NSA intelligence analyst, has also appeared before the Senate Committee. He says: “I’m just the tip of the iceberg …. You need more than people like me, people who work in the field …. You have to get up to where the intelligence is interpreted and used for policy and politics.” Nevertheless, Mooney turned over to the committee lists of American prisoners on which he had worked for more than two years to reconstruct from memory. These lists, with some 120 to 140 names, were comprised of those he believed were captured alive. Mooney’s originals indicated which POWs he had analyzed as being “Moscow Bound,” which of those may have been executed, and “who to ask” about prisoners held after 1973.

The Pathet Lao headquarters in the Sam Neua district was the main Soviet interrogation center, according to Nigel Cawthorne’s study, where certain prized prisoners were sent. Special flak traps had been set up in hopes of getting prisoners who could provide technical information, particularly that which would improve Moscow’s air defenses. These men, with considerable technical expertise, were believed to have been kept in a completely different prison system than those who were returned in Operation Homecoming. At the Laotian headquarters, they would get final debriefing, Cawthorne wrote in ***The Bamboo Cage***. “Once they had been persuaded to co-operate, these men would be taken on to Sary Sagan, Alma Ata, Novosibirsk, Shuli and Baku — major military facilities in the Soviet Union. Jerry Mooney would simply mark these men down on his list with the two letters MB — Moscow Bound. By 1973 there were around 100 names marked MB on Mooney’s list. They did not come home.”

The current Senate Committee is not the only congressional body to have examined the POW/MIA issue, although to call previous ones less than diligent is charitable. For example, consider the ethnic Chinese named Lac, who was dubbed “the Mortician,” a man mentioned in Cawthorne’s work as well as in the book ***Kiss the Boys Good-bye***, by Monika Jensen-Stevenson and William Stevenson. Lac, an undertaker in Hanoi, defected in 1979 and told Congress what he knew — which was considerable — about the warehouse in the capital where the bones of more than 400 Americans were “stacked like cordwood,” waiting to be doled out to the U.S. over the years. It seemed to many that bones would be shipped back whenever the pressure for information on live Americans grew too great.

In June 1980, Lac also astounded the panel when he said he had seen live Americans in 1979 in Hanoi — some six years after all POWs were supposed to be home. Suddenly, as Captain McDaniel

recounted to THE NEW AMERICAN recently, the man who was so believable was out of bounds. The hearing was promptly closed and the testimony about live Americans seen going in and out of the Citadel was classified.

What the Files Show

Some 1.3 million pages of documents are being declassified in the latest development, some dating to 1973. They include, as Washington state journalist Mark Sauter noted in the ***News Tribune***, the fact that U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger (who was in 1973 Assistant Secretary of Defense) not only acknowledged that "we still have the Laos MIA question unresolved," but also that military action was considered to force the release of our men. That of course did not happen, no U.S. prisoners held by the Pathet Lao were repatriated, and the men were abandoned. In response to a March 1973 memo from Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson, Eagleburger wrote, "As a last step, U.S. air strikes and Lao and Thai irregular offensive operations could be resumed in Laos in order to force the release of our prisoners in Laos." Keep in mind that the Pathet Lao forces publicly stated that they were holding American POWs after the Paris Peace Agreement was signed.

Richardson wrote, according to released documents, that the Laotians should be advised that "we know they hold U.S. prisoners, and that we demand their immediate release …. Failure to provide a satisfactory answer could result in direct United States action." Again, however, such action was not forthcoming. Americans were left to die slowly in the hands of the communists.

Very slowly. In 1986, the task force headed by General Tighe noted: "There is information, even in our limited sample, which establishes the strong possibility of American prisoners of war being held in Laos and Vietnam." Moreover, as the ***New York Times*** has reported: "Memorandums recently declassified show that the word 'possibility' had replaced 'probability' between drafts of the document."

From the very end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. government knew it was abandoning our men, the recently declassified documents reveal. They also confirm what has been long believed, that the fate of Americans was lied about officially, and that a cover-up ensued. According to the committee vice-chairman, Senator Bob Smith, that practice has not ended. The senator is sure, he states, that perjury has been committed before the current Senate Committee.

It is in this context, then, that President Bush found himself jeered by the families of the missing American servicemen. He then lost his temper and told them to "shut up and sit down." But they won't.