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The Vietnam MIA story is too important to let it die

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I've been working on the Vietnam MIA story for about a year and a half now. That's a long time as daily journalism goes, so someone could fairly ask me — in fact, I have asked myself — why I keep going.

The simple answer is that the story isn't finished yet. The pivotal government documents that could explain why American prisoners were left behind when the war ended are still being kept hidden from the public. Some of those documents also might help explain what happened to the unreturned prisoners, some of whom could still be alive.

Washington officials, fearful of letting the lid off this volatile story, continue to insist there is "no credible evidence" that there were any prisoners beyond the 591 who were returned by Hanoi in 1973 after the signing of the peace accords. But this claim has long since been reduced to rubbish.

I have pored over thousands of documents — some of them declassified and others leaked to me — and have interviewed scores of people close to the information. The conclusion is inescapable: The North Vietnamese held back a large bloc of prisoners, possibly several

hundred, as negotiating chips to try to exact reparations from Washington.

This disturbing truth has been concealed for 20 years across six presidencies, starting with that of Richard Nixon. One can understand how Mr. Nixon and his advisers feared being accused of dishonor had they told us the awful reality: that in 1973 they felt compelled by the circumstances to accept the peace accords even though many of our prisoners were still captive. Perhaps Mr. Nixon believed that by some means we could win their freedom later.

But since this never happened, one can also understand how, over time, large segments of the defense and intelligence establishments became equally committed to guarding the shameful secret.

They still guard it even though it is no longer a true secret — because they know that if they can keep stonewalling the families of the missing men and keep denying Freedom of Information requests for documents and keep feeding the bulk of the press corps the government line with astonishing success, they can avoid any sustained groundswell of headlines that might alert and arouse the general public. A news story here

and there is simply a pinprick to them. In short, the Washington concealers, who have succeeded for 20 years, believe that if they can hold out long enough, the story will simply die by attrition.

I and a handful of other reporters around the country are hanging in, hoping that somehow the result will be different.

Many Americans, I know, find it difficult to believe that our government would leave men behind. Actually, it happens in all wars. The difference is that when you win, these unreturned men are seen as acceptable losses, and there is a national consensus not to talk about them. But when you lose, as we did in Vietnam, a fungus begins to grow, especially in a nation that extols winning and does not teach its children how to deal with losing.

Thus, we've had 20 years of malaise about losing the Vietnam War, but so far no wide public outcry for the truth about the missing prisoners. The evidence is all there, but perhaps it's too painful for a society to contemplate. Perhaps the dishonor is felt by more than the men who live in Washington.

Yes, the evidence. Last year, three defense secretaries who served under

Mr. Nixon — Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson and James Schlesinger — all testified under oath to a Senate committee that according to the best intelligence at the time, prisoners were still being held by Hanoi after the White House had told the public, in March 1973, that all the prisoners were home.

This story made headlines for one day, and then dropped into oblivion. The press was asleep. The concealers had won again.

That special Senate committee on MIAs heard volumes of similar testimony, but it too chose not to rip the covers off the prisoner secret and shake official Washington. Dozens of witnesses produced evidence that included satellite photos, Washington cable traffic, sightings by local U.S. intelligence sources and intercepted enemy radio messages — all of it about live prisoners in captivity years after the war was over. Some satellite sightings of distress signals are as recent as last year.

All of this was obfuscated in the committee's final report. Neither Mr. Nixon nor Ronald Reagan nor George Bush was required to testify. Mr. Nixon, further, refused to produce the particular Oval Office tapes from 1973 (yes,

that's right, the Watergate tapes), on which he reportedly discussed with aides the tactics of how to present the prisoner story to the public. The Washington press, still asleep, wrote nothing.

The Central Intelligence Agency refused — and still refuses — to release or allow access to its key files on the prisoners. And the CIA's counterpart in the Pentagon, the Defense Intelligence Agency, has similarly stonewalled on its files, such as the satellite imagery of prisoner distress signals marked out on the ground.

George Bush sought to look good, announcing that he was declassifying most of the MIA files. His successor, Bill Clinton, endorsed Mr. Bush's executive order and said declassification would be complete by Veterans Day. The catch: None of the core files came under the executive order. They are still locked away.

I guess these are the reasons why I'm staying with the story.

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