



DAVID PORTNOY—BLACK STAR

The hunt goes on: U.S. search team inspects a helicopter crash site in Cambodia

'A Conspiracy of Silence'

A guide to the latest Vietnam MIA evidence

All our American POWs are on the way home," President Richard Nixon told the nation on March 29, 1973, after a peace agreement in Paris formally ended U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. And for years afterward officials publicly scoffed at suggestions that U.S. servicemen might still be alive in Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia. It was "at least a conspiracy of silence," says Sen. John Kerry. His select committee has questioned dozens of witnesses and forced the White House and Pentagon to declassify more than a million documents in an effort to put the issue to rest. In the most dramatic hearings yet, three Reagan administration officials testified last week that the government feared from the start that some live prisoners were left behind, although they had no proof. Called to testify under oath, former assistant defense secretary Richard Armitage, former National Security Council staffer Richard Childress and former Defense Intelligence Agency head Lt. Gen. Leonard Perroots repeated what MIA families already have been told: a few Americans might still be in Indochina, perhaps voluntarily. Here's a guide to the still-unfolding investigation:

How many Americans were left behind?

The Pentagon lists 2,226 Americans as unaccounted for. Most of those are servicemen believed to have been killed in action but whose bodies were never recovered. The hearings center on a much smaller group. Immediately after the final prisoner

exchange in 1973, called Operation Homecoming, the Defense Intelligence Agency compiled a list of 115 known prisoners in Indochina who had not come home, the committee heard. And three newly declassified government memos written in 1973 conclude that U.S. prisoners were still being held in Laos, where the United States had conducted a secret bombing campaign. In one memo, Lawrence Eagleburger, who was then acting assistant secretary of defense and now deputy secretary of state, recommended that the United States consider airstrikes "to force the release of our prisoners in Laos."

Kerry's committee has compiled a list of 133 servicemen believed held captive in Vietnam and Laos after the 1973 prisoner exchanges. Some were seen by POWs



MISHA ERWIT—SYGMA

Waiting: MIA's sister at Senate hearing

who were repatriated, others transmitted radio messages before they were captured. In many cases, relatives weren't told about these "discrepancy" cases until 1987. A member of one of those families, Dorothy Apodaca Alfond, whose brother's F-4 aircraft was shot down over North Vietnam, said: "Some had already held funerals and closed the cases in their minds—and then the questions started up all over again."

Have any survived?

It can't be ruled out. "There are Americans in Vietnam," Armitage told the committee. "I don't know the circumstances and I cannot prove it to you. They may be living freely."

Investigators say a few U.S. servicemen who were captured eventually cooperated with the Vietnamese and remained after the war. And in a newly declassified 1986 memo, Rear Adm. Thomas Brooks of the DIA speculated that a dozen or more Americans who cooperated with Hanoi after capture might still be in Vietnam but "were not free to leave should they desire to do so." One such collaborator, Bobbie Garwood, claimed after his 1979 release that he had been detained against his will and that other Americans were also being held. His credibility was seen as suspect because he was facing court-martial. Still, another Pentagon report concluded in 1986 that it was "probable" Americans were still being held in Vietnam and Laos.

Was there a cover-up?

A series of administrations insisted that there was no evidence Americans were still held in Indochina after 1973. That wasn't true. Ross Perot, who made three trips to Vietnam in the 1980s on behalf of MIA families, told the committee the government had "covered up, dissembled and finessed this issue for 20-some-odd years." But the testimony painted a picture of blunders, mixed signals and incompetence, rather than a massive conspiracy. And several witnesses have noted that in the 1970s most Americans, not just government officials, were struggling to put Vietnam behind them. Said Childress: "In 1973 millions of Americans were on the streets demonstrating to get out of Vietnam. If there is guilt, if there are sins of our fathers... it's in the American psyche." At last the government is coming clean about what it suspected. But proving that suspicions were covered up doesn't necessarily mean that the conjectures are true. So opening the records is not, in the end, going to close the books.

MELINDA LIU in Washington