

KIT IS NOT CONSPIRACY THEORY, not paranoid myth, not *Rambo* fantasy. It is only hard evidence of a national disgrace: *American prisoners were left behind at the end of the Vietnam War*. They were abandoned because six presidents and official Washington could not admit their guilty secret. They were forgotten because the press and most Americans turned away from all things that reminded them of Vietnam.

In 1973, after the peace accords, Hanoi returned 591 American prisoners and said these were all the prisoners they had. Yet more than 2,200 American military men are still missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. Half or more of those men are known to be dead, though their remains have never been recovered.

But, then, there are the others. The Defense Intelligence Agency (D.I.A.) has received more than 1,600 firsthand sightings of live American prisoners and nearly 14,000 secondhand reports. After reviewing them all, the D.I.A. concluded that they "do not constitute evidence" that men were still alive.

Here are some stories, many previously untold, about the prisoners who did not come home from Vietnam. All of them are accounts of how Washington, in its deep shame at having forsaken these men in its haste to get out of that draining war, has ignored, withheld, dis-

OUR ABANDONED VIETNAM POWS

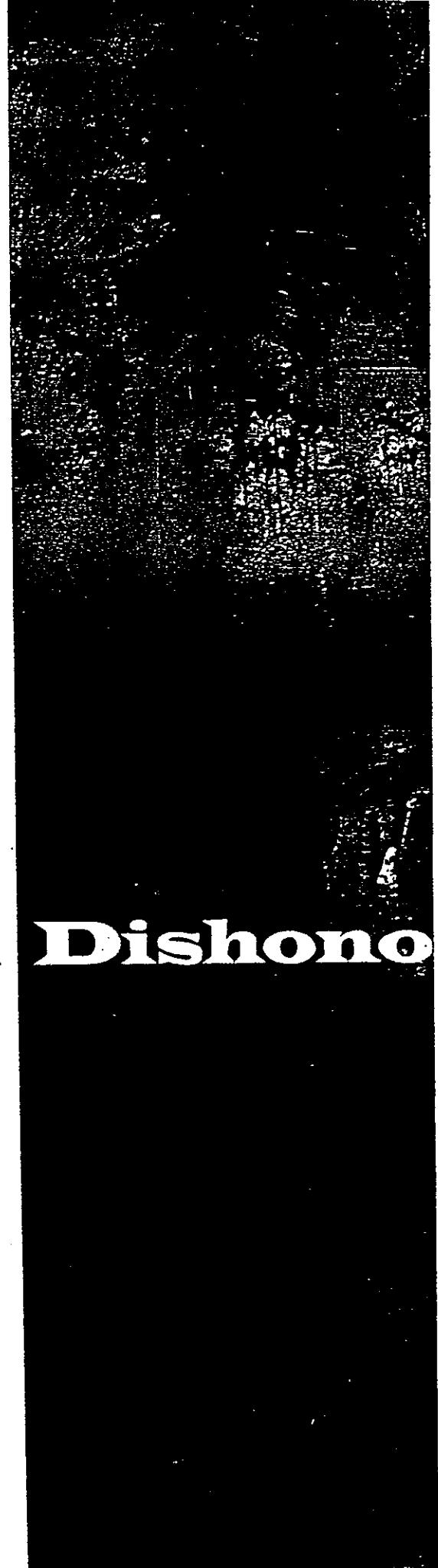
Deceit and Dishonor

ARTICLE BY
SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG

torted, and destroyed evidence of their existence. These accounts are based on government intelligence documents, on sources closely involved with the material, and on other concrete evidence uncovered during two years of reporting. Sadly for this nation's history, they are but a small sampling of a mountain of evidence.

Only nine prisoners were returned from Laos at the end of the Vietnam War. This startled the experts in U.S. military intelligence, because their closely held lists showed more than 300 men missing in that Hanoi-dominated country. More telling still, their field reports

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY KENT WILLIAMS



indicated that most of the men were probably still alive.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, years after the war was over, numerous radio messages about American prisoners were intercepted from Laos, a country bordering on and essentially controlled by Vietnam. The messages, which were exchanges between Laotian military units, spoke clearly about American prisoners being transferred from prison to prison or from prison to labor camp inside Laos.

Those transmissions were picked up by Thai signal personnel and passed to the National Security Agency (N.S.A.), the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.), and the Pentagon's D.I.A. Some of the reports were backed up by HUMINT—human intelligence, meaning live sightings by witnesses on the ground, who reported these same prisoner movements.

Incredibly, all three U.S. intelligence agencies refused to judge these reports as reliable. Their reason: The intercepts were made by a "third party"—namely, Thailand—and under the ground rules laid down by the American intelligence community, third-party information can never be regarded as valid on its own. But this response, a catch-22 if ever one existed, defied common sense, because these Thai signal units had been trained by none other than the National Security Agency, the U.S. intelligence organization responsible for monitoring "signals" transmissions around the world. And the reason the N.S.A. had trained and was using the Thais was that after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the agency largely dismantled its own "collection" network in Southeast Asia.

Here, from the files of the C.I.A., is an example of one of those radio intercepts, supported three days later by an independent source on the ground. The radio message, picked up on the morning of December 27, 1980, said, "Refer to the Politbureau Ministry of Defense that because U.S. and Thai prisoners have been identified by Thais, Politbureau orders they be removed from Attapeu Province [in Southern Laos]. Aircraft will pick up POWs at the [Attapeu] airfield on 28 December at 1230 hours." Then, on December 30, came this message from the C.I.A. station in Bangkok to the C.I.A. director's office in Langley, Virginia: "Met with and taped source from Vientiane. The POWs, half Thais and half European, are now in the valley in permanent location [a prison camp at Nhommarath in Central Laos]. They were transferred from Attapeu to work in various places.... POWs were formerly kept in caves and are very thin, dark, and starving."

Now, consider the insanity of Washington's circular argument. American listening posts were gone, and thus the Thais were essential to monitoring the radio traffic about POWs. Yet, by Washington's definition, the Thai reports were invalid without U.S. corroboration. But the United States no longer had any means of corroboration. The result was unbelievable: With the exception of one botched cross-border foray in 1981, using Lao mercenaries recruited in Thailand, no serious efforts were made to pursue these reports.

Sometimes, documents show, the failure went beyond lack of effort and became just plain cover-up. Documents retrieved from the National Archives show that some of the radio inter-

cepts were simply purged from U.S. government files, presumably to keep the bungling from ever being discovered by outsiders. One of these documents is a paper copy of one of the radio intercepts about prisoners being moved within Laos. On it, the N.S.A. chief in Southeast Asia, John O'Dell, had written, "Purge ... files of any traffic on this subject."

Over the years, scores of what appear to be distress signals were detected by the C.I.A.'s satellite system. The signals were in the form of markings on the ground in Vietnam and Laos—the very markings that American pilots had been specifically trained to use in their pre-Vietnam survival courses. Some symbols consisted of certain letters, like X or K, drawn in a special way. Other markings were the secret and individual four-digit authenticator numbers given to many of the pilots who flew over Vietnam. And, at times, men have simply carved out their own names.

But time and again, when these numbers or letters or names have shown up on the satellite digital imagery, the Pentagon, backed by the C.I.A., insisted out of hand that humans had not made these markings. What were they, then? Nothing but shadows and vegetation, said the government, and normal contours like rice-paddy walls. Whether the satellite picked up letters or numbers or names, the dismissive answer was always the same. Officials of the Defense Intelligence Agency would say, in what seemed an automatic response, "Shadows and vegetation. Shadows and vegetation."

After hearing this refrain for months, one Senate investigator, Bob Taylor, a highly regarded intelligence analyst who had examined the photo evidence, finally commented, in sardonic dissent, "If grass can spell our people's names and a secret, four-digit code, then I have a newfound respect for grass."

Some striking details of the D.I.A.'s nay-saying posture were contained in the report issued last year by the committee on which Taylor served, the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. The material got into the report, however, not because of the committee but largely in spite of it—after heavy resistance, editing, and other machinations by the panel's Pentagon-leaning majority.

Sometimes the D.I.A. uses its fancy word for the distress symbols it rejects: *anomalies*. The D.I.A. men explain with straight faces that a "photo anomaly" is something you see but really isn't there. Independent experts in imagery analysis consider this a bad joke, saying that when you see something on a photo or on digital imagery, it's usually real.

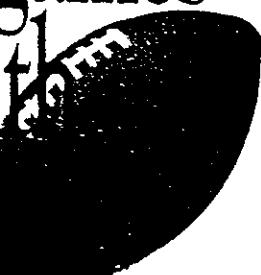
To date, no MIA family has ever been notified by the Pentagon about any of these ground markings, many of which correlated to the name or distress letters or secret four-letter code of a particular missing man. The Pentagon says that since the markings in its opinion were "anomalies" and not man-made, to inform families about them would only subject them to needless, additional anguish.

But the government's own survival experts are livid over the D.I.A.'s parroted "shadows and vegetation and contours" line. In firm rebuttal, the men at J.S.S.A. (the Air Forces survival

TWO SENATORS "BELIEVE THAT LIVE-SIGHTING REPORTS ... ARE EVIDENCE THAT POWS MAY HAVE SURVIVED TO THE PRESENT."



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training unit, officially titled Joint Services Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape Agency) kept explaining that using vegetation and natural formations to construct distress markings was exactly what their agency had trained pilots to do in captivity—so as to be less obvious and avoid detection by their jailers.

Then there are the distress signals that were never even found. Almost all the signals we know about—roughly 100 or so—were discovered in the last few years, meaning that this can be only a fraction of the likely total. The astonishing reason for this is that, although the United States regularly flew low-level reconnaissance planes and spy satellites over Indochina from the end of the war onward, it was not until the 1990s that the intelligence agencies began to look for distress symbols on the voluminous photos and digital imagery they collected. Incredibly, they had no instructions to do so.

The Senate report said, "The Committee was rather surprised to find that neither D.I.A. or C.I.A. imagery analysts were familiar with Vietnam pilot distress symbols, or had a requirement to look for possible symbols, prior to the Committee's inquiry. This was confirmed under oath by imagery analysts from both agencies."

Further on, the report grew even

more damning: "Another indicator that D.I.A. has done little to address the possibility of distress symbols appearing on photography is its inability to account for the Army's, Navy's, or Marine Corps' pilot authenticator numbers. J.S.S.A. still preserves those for the Air Force. As recorded in the hearing of October 15 [1992], D.I.A. does not know what happened to the numbers. This is a significant failure.... It supports the theory that D.I.A. has never taken the possibility of symbols seriously....

"In theory, therefore, if a POW still living in captivity were to attempt to communicate by ground signal, smuggling out a note, or by whatever means possible, and he used his personal authenticator number to confirm his identity, the U.S. government would be unable to provide such confirmation if his number happened to be among those numbers D.I.A. cannot locate."

These revealing passages, however, belied the true nature of the Senate committee. It was dominated by a faction led by its chairman, the charismatic John Kerry of Massachusetts. This group wanted to appear to be probing the prisoner issue energetically, but, in fact, they never rocked official Washington's boat, nor did they lay open the 20 years of secrecy and untruths. Thus, in their final

report, issued in January 1993, after more than a year in operation, the conclusions as to men left behind were watered down and muddled to the point of meaninglessness.

And although a skilled and tenacious staff of committee investigators had managed to weave into the 1,223-page document sizable chunks of potent data that went a good distance toward exposing the POW story, some of the material never made it into the report. Significantly, the staff made the following finding, using intelligence reports that covered sightings only through 1989: "There can be no doubt that POWs were alive... as late as 1989." This staff document was never released.

Two senators, Bob Smith and Charles Grassley, refused to go along with the majority finding in the final report that said there was "no compelling evidence that proves that any American remains alive in captivity in Southeast Asia." But their dissent was relegated to a tiny footnote. The footnote said the two could not accept this finding "because they believe that live-sighting reports and other sources of intelligence are evidence that POWs may have survived to the present."

(Asked for comment, Kerry contended, "No evidence of a cover-up has ever been substantiated. And all 12 sen-

hours, including Bob Smith, unanimously agreed to the committee's conclusion that there was no conspiracy.")

The frustrations faced by those on the committee who were determined to get at the truth are crystallized in the tale of the International Security Affairs documents. The following account is taken from memos, letters, and other documents obtained by this reporter.

In July 1992, eight months into its investigation, the Senate committee was granted clearance by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Alan Ptak, to examine and copy certain key POW files from a branch of the Defense Secretary's office known as International Security Affairs (I.S.A.). On July 10, committee staffers headed for the Pentagon's Central Documentation Office (C.D.O.) in Clarendon, Virginia, where the files had been shifted, because this was the office designated to process all the committee's requests for information. The stonewalling began instantly upon their arrival at C.D.O.

Chuck Wells, a middle-level Pentagon manager, met the committee aides in the lobby and told them that it was the contention of I.S.A. that the committee had seen all its files. The staffers told him this wasn't true, noting specifically that they had yet to see a single W.A.R. (Weekly Activity Report) or SECDEF Breakfast Item. These are pivotal docu-

ments. Breakfast items, for example, are minutes of then weekly one-on-one meetings of the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State, at which the two men would discuss sensitive, top-priority foreign-affairs matters in an informal and very candid setting. The committee staffers knew that POW issues had been discussed at some of these meetings and in the Weekly Activity Reports.

Wells kept stalling them, saying he would try to call I.S.A. again. Finally, after three hours, stuck in an out-of-the-way room, "He told us flatly there would be no files made available."

Another staffer, in his record of this encounter, wrote, "Our access ... remains stonewalled."

Returning to Capitol Hill, the staffers kept pushing. They got committee counsel Bill Codinha to call Alan Ptak, who repeated that they had full access, as had been stated in a letter to the committee from the Defense Secretary himself. Ptak said the problem must lie at the Central Documentation Office. To the staffers it sounded as if the finger-pointing was a smoke screen for the likelihood that everyone was in on the stonewall, since it made no sense that a lowly Pentagon document office would defy a clearance granted by the Defense Secretary.

Also obstructing these staffers was the fact that some of the top committee

people—including the committee chairman, Senator Kerry, and his chief counsel and old friend, Bill Codinha—seemed to have an inappropriately cozy relationship with the Defense Department.

For one thing, Codinha and Ptak maintained unusually close ties throughout the investigation. [Staffers noticed that the Pentagon always seemed to know the committee's next move.] But more important, Kerry, in his public remarks over time, had made clear that his interest was in ending the embargo against Vietnam and bringing about improved relations. And he also arranged committee hearings and meetings in a manner that made the Pentagon a virtual *partner* in the committee's inquiry instead of being a subject of the probe.

As one staffer wrote, in a memo preserved from the period, "Speaking for the other investigators, I can say we are sick and tired of this investigation being controlled by those we are supposedly investigating."

(Kerry disputes all this. When asked to comment for this article, he said his "only interest in lifting the embargo was to improve access" to POW/MIA information. And he says that "the committee was dependent on the Pentagon to obtain much of its information, but the relationship was in no way a partnership. The committee fully investigated all allegations of Pentagon cover-up and malfeasance.")

Tellingly though, the committee staffers came across transcripts of electronic messages from within the Pentagon that confirmed what they already suspected: The purpose of the stalling was to allow the Pentagon to go through the requested files and sanitize them—that is, take out all the sensitive papers. One such internal message said, "Purpose here is to give Ptak/Ross time to review the roughly 25 percent of ... material [the committee] has not seen." (Edward Ross was Ptak's deputy and, ironically, was later promoted to chief of the Pentagon's POW/MIA office.)

The days turned into months, and still no documents. On September 8, 1992, Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire, who has led the fight in Congress against the cover-up, sent off a strong and detailed "eyes-only" letter to Defense Secretary Richard Cheney. In it he cited the document stonewalling by the above officials and said, "One can only presume their reason was to gain time to screen the remaining files for certain documents they, apparently, did not wish the committee to see." Smith called it "a serious breach" of Cheney's stated full-access policy and demanded that something be done.

Cheney forwarded the letter to the I.S.A. office, thus giving the job of explaining away the stonewalling to the



very office responsible for it. The I.S.A. chief, Assistant Secretary of Defense James Lilley, assigned his deputy, Ptak, to draft a response to Smith. According to a confidential source, Ptak consulted his friend, committee counsel Codinha, and a September 28 letter to the senator was produced over Lilley's signature. (Codinha denies that his relationship with Ptak was a close one and says there was "nothing untoward" or "inappropriate" about it. He also says that he has no memory of the Lilley letter. As for Ptak, at press time he had not responded to requests for comment.) The letter said that the whole mess was "the result of a misunderstanding. Committee staff members were notified quickly that the remaining ... policy files were available for review, and committee investigators subsequently reviewed the files in their complete, unaltered state."

All this was patently false. And ridiculous. The I.S.A. had essentially cleared itself. "We never did see that 25 percent of the files," a committee investigator said afterward. "They shoved files at us and said it was everything, but it was stuff we had already seen. It was outrageous. We never did get to see a single Weekly Activity Report or Breakfast Item."

He went on: "They were afraid of what we would find in those files, and that's why they cleaned them out. And

Cheney's commitment was only on paper. They were obstructing the investigation, pure and simple." (Senator Kerry, in his comment, said, "The Defense POW/MIA office has documented that it responded fully and accurately to all of the more than 400 requests for documents made by committee members and their staff.")

Then there are the instances when vital documents have not only been withheld, but actually destroyed.

One such case involved certain letters that had emerged from Laos in the late 1980s and reached the Department of Defense at about the same time. They were reportedly written by three missing airmen—John Robertson, Larry Stevens, and Albro Lundy.

The letters drew particular attention at the Pentagon because they appeared to be written in code. According to documents, including memoirs written by former POWs, a number of the airmen who flew combat in Vietnam had been trained in special coding methods as a survival technique, should they be captured. The purpose, for example, was to get messages out to the Pentagon through their families by writing letters in language that was coded but would seem harmless to their captors and would therefore be passed on.

Documents in the National Archives show that Lundy was one of the airmen trained in this technique. Like all others

with this training, one of his missions upon capture was to teach the coding system to as many other prisoners as possible.

Something else was important about those trained in the coding, who numbered perhaps a couple hundred men. The Pentagon kept a separate file on each of them, containing that man's personal coding details. Each file also held special biographical and personal information that would be known only to that man and those closest to him. These private facts were to be coded into any letters or messages the men sent out, to establish their authenticity.

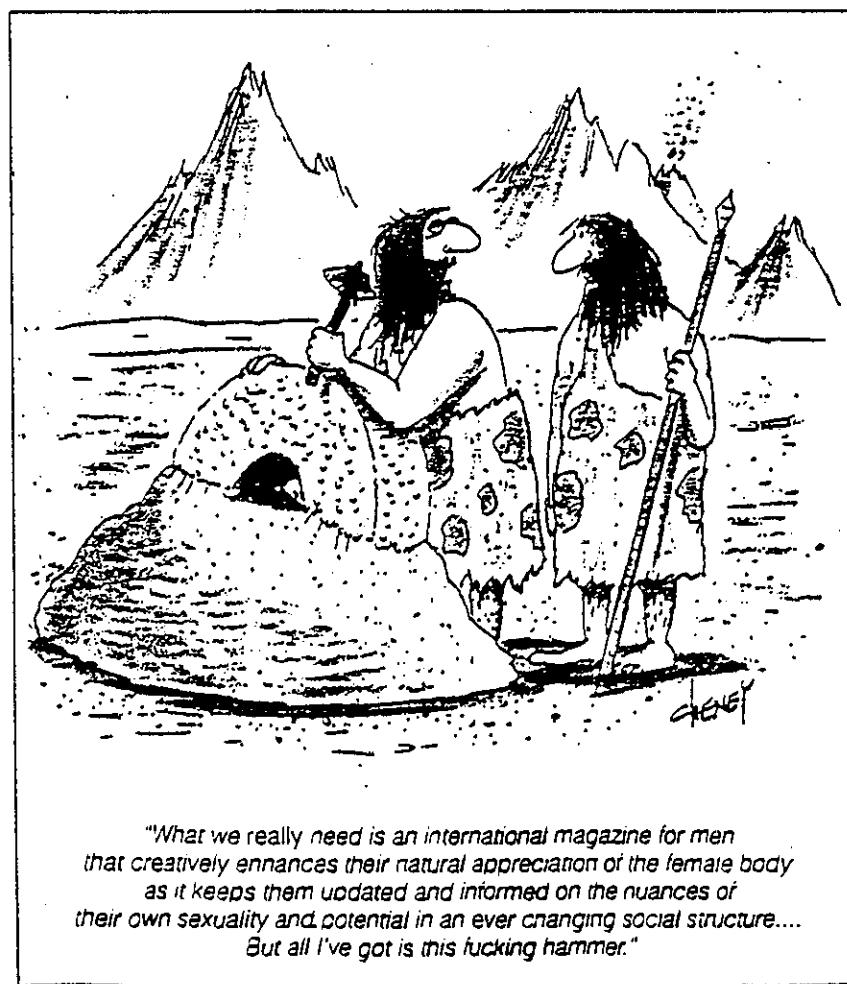
When the Robertson, Stevens, and Lundy letters came in, as revealed in archival records, they were given to the special Pentagon unit trained to decipher codes and other "authentication" techniques the missing men might use. Upon examining the letters, the experts in this unit concluded that they contained signs of special coding. They said they had found a number of "striking correlations" consistent with a conclusion that the letters were likely the work of American POWs. But the only way to decode the messages was to have access to those special files—and the files were held by the D.I.A.

The special Pentagon unit requested Lundy's file, since he was the only one of the three trained in these procedures and could have trained the other two. The answer came back that Lundy's file had been destroyed. The unit could proceed no further. With this, the D.I.A. not only chose to ignore the unit's preliminary findings, but arbitrarily decided the letters were fraudulent.

However, according to archival documents, staffers on the Senate POW committee learned of this and began asking questions of the Pentagon. Why, they asked, had Lundy's file been purged? The Pentagon replied that a number of those folders had been destroyed one by one over the course of the Vietnam War, as airmen periodically were declared K.I.A./B.N.R.—Killed in action/Body not recovered. One reason the Pentagon gave for this action was to clear some space in its overburdened file system. The whole story was a fabrication, start to finish.

The committee staffers, digging deeper, discovered that the files had not been destroyed one by one, but all at the same time. And this surge occurred not during the war but in 1975, two years after the American military role had ended with the Paris peace accords. "It was bullshit. They destroyed them all on one day," said one source.

The staffers also determined that the Pentagon's story—that the only files destroyed were those of men who had been declared Killed in action/Body not recovered—did not stand up under examination. A number of men who had



been written off in that category were, to the Pentagon's surprise, among those prisoners returned in 1973. Their files had not only not been destroyed before 1973, but they are still kept by the Pentagon. Also, the files of men who were known definitively to have died in captivity were never destroyed. Their files, too, still exist.

Thus, astonishingly, the only files the Pentagon destroyed were those of men who were still missing in action and unaccounted for after 1973—and thus could have been some of the men held back by Hanoi, men who could possibly be prisoners to this day.

Unless the Pentagon was trying to hide its dishonor over leaving men behind, why would it destroy the files of men still unaccounted for and preserve files of men who have returned? Remember, the sole reason such records were maintained in the first place was to help verify the existence of prisoners and get them back.

"The destruction of those files was devastating," said a source, "because it wiped out any ability to confirm the authenticity of any coded letters or messages that might have come out since 1973 or might come out in the future."

In short, if a POW tried to signal his existence now, using such coded messages, it would be useless.

What could explain this shameful pattern of behavior, spanning six presidencies, breaking faith with those who went to battle believing their country would do everything for them if they were taken prisoner?

For the answers one has to go back 21 years, to the days when President Richard Nixon, desperate to get out of Vietnam and besieged by the expanding Watergate scandal, instructed Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser and chief negotiator with North Vietnam at the Paris peace talks, to do whatever was necessary to end the longest war in our history.

Thus, on January 27, 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed the peace agreement. And, on that day, the North Vietnamese gave the United States their list of American prisoners. It showed only 591 men—a figure far below what U.S. intelligence had expected. But what could be done? The agreement had been signed, and neither the American public nor Congress, weary to the bone with this war, would countenance a resumption of the conflict.

Two months after the signing, Hanoi released the last of the 591 men and President Richard Nixon went on national television and said, "All of our

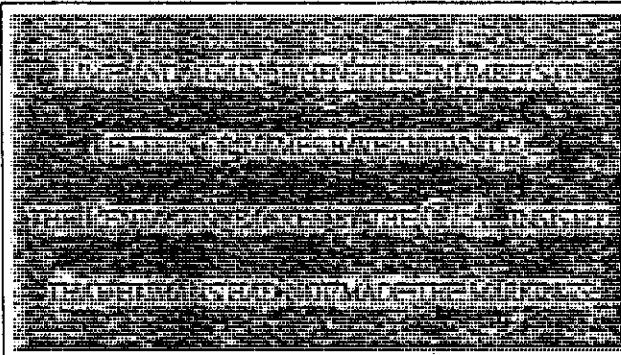
American POWs are on their way home."

It is now unshakably clear, from a mass of evidence, that Nixon knew this was not true. Several of his key appointees—notably, Defense Secretaries Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson, and James Schlesinger—testified under oath at Senate hearings that they were convinced by the intelligence data before them that a number of men were not returned. That intelligence, and a flood of data since unearthed, shows that the number was in the hundreds.

Schlesinger, when he testified, was asked why Nixon would have accepted this. He replied, "One must assume that we had concluded that the bargaining position of the United States ... was quite weak. We were anxious to get our troops out and we were not going to rock the waters...."

Then he was asked "a very simple question. In your view, did we leave men behind?"

"I think that, as of now," replied the former defense secretary and C.I.A. chief,



"that I can come to no other conclusion, senator.... Some were left behind."

The intelligence data also makes clear that Hanoi's motive for holding back prisoners was ransom. The North Vietnamese kept them as pawns to extract from Washington the reparations money they believed they had been promised by Nixon and Kissinger. Indeed, a letter from Nixon to Hanoi's Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, pledged \$3.25 billion over five years in "reconstruction" aid plus another "one to 1.5 billion dollars ... on food and other commodity needs." Though that letter was written on February 1, 1973, just days after the peace accords were concluded, it was kept secret for more than four years.

Both Nixon and Kissinger have since said that the aid was never given because Hanoi consistently violated the peace agreement. Kissinger also said, in his testimony before the Senate POW committee in 1992, that "it had been our constant position that we would never give aid to ransom our prisoners."

Credible reports have surfaced over the years of Vietnamese overtures to Washington through third countries, offering to return live prisoners for that same \$4 billion. The overtures, accord-

ing to the reports, were either rejected or fell apart in negotiations. Official Washington refuses to provide details.

One such offer was apparently made in the early days of the Reagan administration in 1981. A Treasury Department agent, John Syphrit, was on Secret Service duty then in the White House, where he overheard a conversation about a proposal from Hanoi to turn over a number of live POWs for \$4 billion. Four people were involved in that conversation—President Reagan, Vice-President Bush, C.I.A. director William Casey, and national security adviser Richard Allen.

Reportedly, they had just emerged, with others, from a meeting on national security issues in the Oval Office, where the ransom offer had apparently come up, and the four stepped across the hall into the Roosevelt Room to discuss it further. Syphrit and a colleague were in the room, installing some technical equipment. They could hear the ensuing discussion.

Apparently, the president and his men believed the Hanoi offer to be genuine. It was reportedly conveyed by the North Vietnamese through a Canadian diplomat. Several of Reagan's advisers opposed the idea of paying for prisoners, calling it blackmail. Casey was holding some kind of message in his hand and referring to it as he spoke, asking for instructions on how to proceed. He was cool to the offer. Bush called it a "lost cause." Allen, however, urged that it be pursued. Reagan then told Casey and Allen to look into it further.

It seems the nay-sayers prevailed, because no evidence has ever surfaced that the offer was seriously explored.

Syphrit, however, was a veteran of the Vietnam War. He could not rest holding a secret that could snuff the claim made by both Hanoi and Washington—that all the prisoners were returned in 1973. So he told Senator Smith, and in 1992 the Senate POW committee contacted him.

Syphrit, no longer a Secret Service agent but still working for the Treasury Department in another capacity, told them he was willing to testify. He said, though, that the committee would have to subpoena him, because he feared reprimand from Treasury if he came forward voluntarily. The subpoena was issued. Immediately, the White House and Treasury began lobbying strenuously against allowing Syphrit to testify, arguing that this would violate the trust between the Secret Service and those it protects.

Twice Syphrit, now stationed in Chicago, traveled to Washington,

expecting to appear. And twice the committee put him off, still undecided as to what to do. Finally, a vote was set on whether to call him to testify. It was seven to four—against. Once again the committee had decided to sweep crucial information under its rug.

But the committee *did* take testimony from one of the participants in the ransom discussion witnessed by Syphrit. It was Richard Allen, national security adviser.

In lengthy, closed-door testimony under oath to committee investigators on June 23, 1992, he generally confirmed Hanoi's 1981 offer, but he seemed hesitant about giving details. His testimony has never been released, but *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter Robert Caldwell obtained the section relating to the offer and wrote about it.

Allen was asked by a committee staffer, "Soon after taking office, did the Reagan administration become involved in an offer made by the Vietnamese government for the return of live prisoners of war, if you can recall?"

He responded, "This \$4 billion figure sticks in my mind, and I remember writing something—I don't know whether it was during a meeting with the president or to him—saying that it would be worth the president's going along and let's have the negotiation...."

Then he was asked, "Do you recall whether the \$4 billion was for live

American prisoners?" to which he replied, "Yes, I do. If it was \$4 billion, it was indeed for live prisoners." (Some sources say the number of men was 56 or 57.)

Allen told the committee that, based on "waves of information," both he and Reagan believed in 1981 that American servicemen were still being held in Indochina. Asked how many he believed were there, he said, "Dozens, hundreds."

Unfortunately and mysteriously, nearly a month after giving his deposition—and two weeks after his testimony confirming the ransom offer had been revealed in *The Washington Times*—Allen wrote a strange letter to the committee, recanting what he had said about the 1981 offer. This retraction, however, unlike his testimony, was not given under oath. In the letter, he said his memory had played tricks on him. Yes, he had heard something about such an offer, but it had come years later from POW activists, who asked him about it at a meeting with him in 1986, when he was no longer in government. "It appears there never was a 1981 meeting about the return of POW/MIA for \$4 billion," he wrote.

The committee, in its final report, echoed Allen's recantation, saying that the inquiry into the Syphrit matter "failed to disclose any evidence of this offer." In fact, it went further and said that it

found "no convincing evidence that Vietnam or Laos had ever offered, in 1981 or at any time, live prisoners for money. This was rather surprising in view of the statement made at a committee hearing by its vice-chairman, Senator Smith, a dissenter who had fought hard for more aggressive investigation. Smith said that the committee had received "information that, on at least four occasions, the Vietnamese reportedly indicated to the United States, through third parties and third countries, that there were live American servicemen in Vietnam and Laos who could be returned through negotiations with the United States."

The senator even cited the dates of the reported overtures—January 1977; January 1981; late 1984—early 1985; and 1989—90. Smith's revelations came on December 1, 1992, about a month before the committee was to shut down. Yet this hardly persuaded the members to seek an extension of the panel's life.

The preparation of the final report was in full swing; there would be no further inquiry. The report sought to depict the committee's investigation of the 1981 ransom report as exhaustive. The reality was otherwise. For instance, a staff memo states that the C.I.A. and the National Security Council did not allow the committee staff to review "the most sensitive files, where this type of offer might be recorded."

Moreover, of the four participants in the White House meeting that Syphrit said he witnessed, only Allen had been deposed.

Reagan, now an ex-president, refused to answer any questions on any subject; the committee did not contest his refusal. Bush, who was now president and whose marks were all over this issue from his days as C.I.A. chief in the 1970s, was never even approached. The committee cited "unique concerns about Executive Privilege." And Casey was dead.

Even though he never testified, former Secret Service agent Syphrit was harassed and as a result left the Treasury Department some months ago, after 25 years of government service.

As the years passed, the original human failure—leaving men behind in the rush to get out—was compounded by human weakness, as one administration after another saw the overwhelming evidence yet did almost nothing. They either felt powerless to make the Vietnamese give the prisoners back or refused on principle to pay ransom (though the French had done so, successfully, after their Vietnam war). Frozen in a posture of inaction, U.S. officials apparently concluded that telling the truth about the POWs would not only be admitting a national scandal, but



"It's not exactly a diploma. It's a notarized testimonial of my having studied Penthouse's 'Forum' for 25 years."

would spark a hostage crisis of major proportions, one that Washington did not know how to solve. So they obfuscated and lied. And with each new disclosure of prisoner evidence, the lies had to multiply and swell. Were the truth told, too many Washington careers would be destroyed, too many powerful people burned.

Since the end of the war, Vietnam has turned over nearly 300 sets of remains that have been identified as Americans, yet the Pentagon has never determined a single one of these men to have died after the war's end. But whether it be hard intelligence or sheer improbability, nothing cracks the Pentagon's mask of denial—not the radio intercepts, not the live sightings, not the satellite photos of ground markings. Nothing.

However, one piece of evidence did throw the government's debunking machine into a frenzy—a top-secret Soviet intelligence document that emerged two years ago from Moscow's military archives. It was a Russian translation of what was described as a senior North Vietnamese general's report to the Hanoi politburo. Brought to light by a Harvard researcher, Stephen Morris, it

said that as of September 1972, just four months before the signing of the peace accords, Hanoi was holding twice as many prisoners as it would hand over to the United States.

The report said: "1,205 American prisoners of war [are] located in the prisons of North Vietnam—this is a big number. Officially, until now, we published a list of only 368 prisoners of war [the number Hanoi was then admitting at the Paris talks]. The rest we have not revealed."

It went on: "The government of the U.S.A. knows this well, but it does not know the exact number of prisoners of war and can only make guesses based on its losses. That is why we are keeping the number of prisoners of war secret, in accordance with the [Hanoi] politburo's instructions."

Predictably, Vietnam, after two decades of publicly denying it had held back any prisoners, angrily called the document a fabrication. But Washington, too, became apoplectic. Though forced to acknowledge that the report was an authentic Soviet document, the Pentagon nonetheless insisted that it "is replete with errors, omissions, and propaganda that seriously damage its credibility."

Specifically, the Pentagon said the 1,205 figure had to be in error because

this would mean that 600 additional POWs existed and such a conclusion was "inconsistent with our own accounting."

But why inconsistent? When Hanoi released the 591 men in 1973, the Pentagon itself said there were still 1,328 Americans missing in action and unaccounted for. If half or less were alive, the 1,205-prisoner document seems anything but farfetched.

Besides, what motive could Soviet military intelligence have had for putting a phony report in its files in 1972? Were they thinking ahead with the notion of embarrassing their Vietnamese allies 20 years down the road? It makes no sense.

Moreover, other recently declassified U.S. intelligence reports reveal interviews with North Vietnamese defectors who gave information about unreturned prisoners that closely resembles that contained in the Soviet document. These defectors were regarded as reliable by their American interrogators.

One of them, Le Dinh, had worked in Hanoi's military-intelligence apparatus for four years, and had seen and met with U.S. POWs. He was interviewed in Paris in 1979 and 1980 by Pentagon intelligence officials. Their report quotes him as saying that Vietnam had "retained a 'strategic asset' of over 700



U.S. to pay reparations."

This directly paralleled the Soviet "1,205" document, which said that only some of the prisoners would be returned "at this time." The others, it said, would not be freed until Washington made political concessions and granted economic aid. "Nixon must compensate North Vietnam for those enormous losses which the destructive war caused," it said, adding, "These are the principles on the basis of which we are able to resolve the question of the American prisoners of war."

Another very significant aspect of both these reports was the assertion that Hanoi had established a covert secondary network of prison camps, where unacknowledged prisoners were held. The Pentagon has always insisted there was only one prison system, a relatively small number of facilities where the 591 returned prisoners were last held. It has vehemently rejected the possibility that a "second-tier" system existed, where other prisoners could have been hidden.

Here, too, the evidence clearly challenges the Pentagon's position. Newly declassified reports, from both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, record eyewitness sightings of live American POWs being held between 1976 and 1980 in at least five prison camps in North Vietnam from which no POWs ever returned. The Vietnamese witnesses also reported that they saw 81 graves clustered around the five camps, and they drew diagrams of the burial sites. They said these Americans had died of disease, malnutrition, and rigorous labor conditions, and some of the sources said they actually witnessed burials. The sources were deemed credible by the intelligence investigators. Some were given polygraph tests; they passed. There is no notation in any of these reports of a source who failed a polygraph. The five camps in these reports (not the only camps named in "second-tier" evidence) were Quyet Tien, Thanh Phong, Yen Bai, Ha Son Binh, and Tan Lap-Phu Tho.

Here are excerpts from reports on the Quyet Tien camp, near Vietnam's northern border with China: "Source [a Vietnamese who was interned there] claims to have observed 50 or more American prisoners. These prisoners were brought to Quyet Tien as a group in late 1973-early 1974 and were still there when source was moved to another camp in mid-1977.

"Source ... claims to have observed [prisoners] from a distance of 30 to 50 meters on a daily basis. Source was told they were Americans but had no contact... Source claims another prisoner told him of assisting in the burial of 12 Americans sometime in 1976....



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charts, it was the opinion of the examiners that there was no deception in the answers to questions concerning his observations of prisoners he was told were Americans."

Another intelligence report on Quyet Tien, from a Vietnamese source who was part of a circus group sent in to entertain the cadre at this remote camp, said that "while at the reception hall, source and the group were thanked by a cadre for coming to perform and told not to communicate with 'puppet troops from Saigon and U.S. pilots....' Source claimed she ... observed a small group of male Caucasian prisoners (six to seven) who were dressed in light-blue hospital-type pajamas and also striped-type pajamas.... Source heard from the camp commander ... that the Caucasians were U.S. pilots and were being held at Quyet Tien because it was a special camp."

The reports on the other camps are equally telling. A former inmate at the Thanh Phong camp told American investigators that "the American prisoners who were on work detail were not allowed to go further than 100 meters from their enclosures. Source said that a farmer, Hoan, had shown him the site of a cemetery for American prisoners of war. Hoan [told source] there were 40 bodies in the cemetery. Source said ... he could see the mounds of about 30 graves. Source said that from October 1979 through November 1980, he saw the funerals of ten American prisoners of war."

One intelligence document tells of an event in 1978: "Viet female refugee, former schoolteacher who was cooperative, in good health, and mentally alert, observed 15 to 20 Americans at location approximately 10 to 15 kilometers west of Am Thuan railroad station ... under guard, on a work detail. Nearest American said, 'We are Americans, you ladies go back to Saigon and tell about it.' American spoke in fluent Vietnamese." The interviewer wrote that he "believes that [the] report is credible."

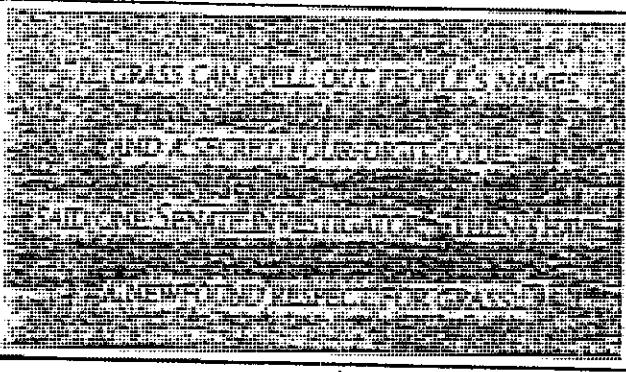
And in 1982, a source told of 20 POW graves at Ha Son Binh prison, where, in 1979, he "and three other persons had buried an American pilot" who had died of malaria.

Despite this evidence, and much additional data, the Pentagon has persisted in denying the existence of a separate prison system. The reason given: The POWs who were returned said they knew nothing about POWs in other camps. But this is hollow reasoning. If Hanoi had a separate system, as all these reports indicate, its very purpose and design would be to keep it secret in order to hide

North Vietnamese chose to reveal them. And thus, the 591 returned POWs, who were held in a small number of prisons in Hanoi and its environs, would have been deliberately walled off from the others and kept in the dark.

I asked the Pentagon about these prisons. Major Steve Little, the spokesman on POW/MIA affairs, called back a week later to say that all five prison sites had been visited and investigated. (My own Pentagon sources told me that only one of the sites had been visited by a Pentagon team, a visit that had taken place only recently, and only after Senator Bob Smith had gone there.)

If indeed these prison sites had been visited, there would have to be field reports on those investigations. To confirm Major Little's response, I asked him for those field reports. Five days later, he responded by informing me that I would have to submit a request under the Freedom of Information Act. I did so on March 10. At this writing, in June, I have



yet to receive a single document.

The Pentagon's conduct, on prisons as on every other POW issue, has long been protected by most of the Washington establishment. On the evening of January 26 of this year, Bob Smith rose to the Senate floor to oppose a resolution sponsored by Senator Kerry calling on President Clinton to lift the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam "expeditiously." Smith had introduced a different resolution, one that would have required the president, before ending the embargo, to certify that Vietnam had provided "the fullest possible unilateral resolution of all cases" of missing men.

Smith tried that night to present new and tangible POW evidence—in particular, the documents on the secondary prison system—but he was continuously interrupted and badgered by Kerry and his allies. Kerry sneered at the reports on Quyet Tien and the four other camps, calling them "a lot of allegations" that Smith had "thrown out" to the Senate. Without offering a single fact in rebuttal, the Massachusetts senator dismissed the documents as "some old reports taken out of context or something ... but it is not real evidence."

One of Kerry's fellow debunkers, Senator John McCain, in a radio ap-

evidence as "raw files." The Arizo Republican, a cosponsor of the embargo-lifting resolution, said there could have been a secondary prison system "because we would have known about it." But that's exactly what these comments show: That at some point after the war, we did know about it.

In the Senate debate itself, McCain like Kerry, provided no facts of his own but simply launched into a diversionary tirade against "the professional malcontents, conspiracy mongers, con artists and dime-store Rambo's who attend this issue...."

The Kerry-McCain resolution passed easily, 62 to 38, and though it was no binding on the president, it gave him, McCain's words, "political cover." With days, Clinton had ended the 19-year-old embargo against trading with Vietnam. Four months later, in May, the two countries announced they were establishing diplomatic missions in each other's capital, the last step before an exchange of ambassadors and full recognition.

But lifting embargoes and calling intelligence reports "raw files" cannot erase the tangible evidence. In order to knock down intelligence reports such as those above on the prisons, you have to produce further hard information demonstrating convincingly why the earlier reports were not credible. No such further reports have been provided.

There's a myth in Washington that virtually all the government's POW documents have been declassified and are available to the public. Bush, in 1992 issued the first declassification directive. Clinton, after taking office in 1993 said he had speeded up Bush's executive order, and last November, on Veterans Day, he announced the process completed.

Wonderful. Try finding any of the C.I.A.'s key operational files on POWs in the National Archives or the Library of Congress. Try finding satellite imagery of POW distress signals. Where are the missing memos and cables on the Vietnamese ransom offers? The truth is that the most significant files, from the highest levels of government and the intelligence community, were not covered by the Bush and Clinton executive orders and remain under lock and key.

(Not that declassifying files necessarily brings them to light. The Pentagon, for example, says it sent stacks of declassified National Security Agency documents to the Library of Congress. But here is how one researcher, Roger Hall, described the situation in a letter to *The Washington Times*: "... the mate-

DECEIT

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rial has been deliberately mislabeled and scattered into different categories. Those who wish access to these documents are thwarted by the deliberate and malicious concealment of information. There is no way for any average citizen—or expert—doing research on the POW/MIA issue to find this particular material.”

And then there are the Nixon tapes. Nixon refused, when the Senate POW committee asked him, to produce the tapes from 1973 (yes, that’s right, the Watergate tapes from the Oval Office) that are believed to contain his conversations with Brent Scowcroft and others on the tactics of how to present the prisoner story to the public. One can understand how the late president 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. But that was 21 years ago—and still we are denied the truth.

Over time there have been Pentagon officers, some even in key posts, who tried to tell the truth. Their reports found the Defense Intelligence Agency to be permeated by a “mind-set to debunk.” And when the reports leaked out, the debunking machine would shift into high gear once again. Sometimes these officers were defamed as malcontents or worse.

One of those reports was done in 1986 by Eugene Tighe, who was assigned to review the work of the D.I.A. A retired Air Force Lieutenant General, Tighe had been a director of the D.I.A. after the Vietnam War.

His report said, “D.I.A. holds information that establishes the strong possibility of American prisoners being held in Laos and Vietnam.” Tighe cited “a large volume of evidence.”

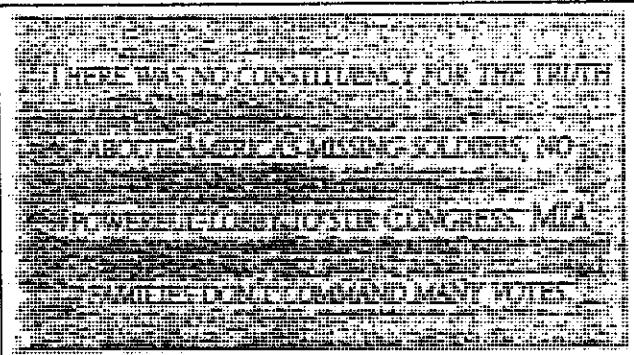
His original language, which was toned down by the Pentagon, had been even stronger, but regardless, Tighe had concluded that men remained alive as prisoners in 1986. The Pentagon and its allies immediately launched a smear campaign against this highly regarded intelligence officer (who died earlier this year at 72). Officials began whispering to reporters that Tighe was “not too bright,” suggesting senility.

In early 1991, Colonel Millard Peck resigned in disgust after only eight months as the head of the Pentagon’s POW/MIA office. In a devastating departure statement, he said, “The mind-set to ‘debunk’ is alive and well. It

analysis is directed to finding fault with the source. Rarely has there been any effective, active follow-through on any of the sightings.... The sad fact is that... a cover-up may be in progress. The entire charade does not appear to be an honest effort and may never have been.”

Finally, Peck said, “From what I have witnessed, it appears that any soldier left in Vietnam, even inadvertently, was, in fact, abandoned years ago, and that the farce that is being played is no more than political legerdemain done with ‘smoke and mirrors’ to stall the issue until it dies a natural death.”

Why has there been no wide and sustained public outcry over this national scandal? The answer is simplicity itself. When the war ended, almost everyone in America wanted to forget Vietnam, erase it, bury it. They still do. The soldiers who came home were reviled as baby killers. We shunned them because, as a culture, we have been imbued with the notion that winning is



the only thing. Indeed, we have never been taught how to cope with losing anything, let alone a war. There was no constituency for the truth, no powerful lobby to stir Congress. MIA families don’t command many votes.

The press participated in this national amnesia. Newspapers and television networks and radio stations had sent legions of reporters to Vietnam to cover the war and chase down Pentagon and White House untruths. Yet afterward, to my knowledge, not one major print or broadcast organization ever assigned an investigative team or any significant resources to find out what happened to the missing men, to find out if the Pentagon and White House were lying. Worse still, to hide its delinquency, the mainstream press, for the last two decades, has by and large bought the government line that no evidence exists of men left behind.

Over the years, no one has suffered more from this policy of deceit and cover-up than the families of the missing men. The consistent manner in which the parents, wives, and children of the MIAs have been manipulated and denied information by their government has left a great many of them not only bitter and angry, but, in some

An episode occurred very recently that is all too typical of the trials to which our government has subjected these families. In April 1993, the wife and two daughters of Henry “Mick” Serex, an Air Force major whose radar-jamming communications plane was downed over the Demilitarized Zone in 1972, learned that a satellite photo taken less than a year earlier—on June 5, 1992—showed what appeared to be the letters *S E R E X* drawn into a field next to a prison in North Vietnam, not far from Haiphong.

The Serexes did not get this news from the Pentagon (which, in 20 years, had told them almost nothing about their father except that he had been declared Killed in action/Body not recovered). They learned it instead when the photo was mentioned on a television talk show by an MIA activist.

Confused and distressed, the Serexes began pressing the Pentagon for more information. It took months of pleading and arguing—and the intervention of Senator Smith—before the Pentagon reluctantly agreed to give the family a briefing on the photo in Washington.

The briefing took place in January of this year at the C.I.A.’s photo lab, which is shared by the Pentagon. Filled with nervous anticipation, the Serexes flew in from the West Coast—only to be the latest family to feel misled and bamboozled by the debunking machine.

Specifically, for nine hours over two days, about 15 D.I.A. officials filled the room and, as one, told the family members that the images they thought they were seeing on a print made from the electronic imagery were neither man-made nor letters spelling out the name “Serex” in capitals on the ground. Instead, the officials said, these images were “a configuration” and “changes in texture” that disappeared when “enhanced” on the computer screen. What they saw were “anomalies,” they were told.

The Serexes went home feeling empty and emotionally used. The truth, they believed, had been withheld from them.

One of the daughters, Jennifer Serex Helwig, a Sacramento, California, mother of three who also works, has continued to struggle with the Pentagon futilely, for more information. It has left her drained.

Her voice falters and chokes in the middle of a conversation. “I’m on the verge of tears all the time now. I can’t help it,” she says, pushing the words out. “Even when I’m doing housework, I feel guilty that I’m not working on this. This shouldn’t be happening. I can’t do anything to deserve this.”