

# BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

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## Did America Abandon Vietnam War P.O.W.'s? Part 2



*National Security Adviser Richard Allen (left) with Sec. of State Alexander Haig (right), 1981.  
(Photo: The New York Times.com)*

### A closer look at an ugly issue

By Sydney H. Schanberg

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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 shatter 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.

### **Testimony thwarted**

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 reprisal 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.

### **Closed-door testimony**

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 Allen 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).

### **Believed POWs held**

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/MIAs 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 a 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.”

### **Overture dates cited**

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 the 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 refused to comment**

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 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.

### **300 sets of remains**

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.

### **'1,205 American prisoners'**

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.

### **Defectors' tales**

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 prisoners that could be used to force the 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 destruction 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."

### **Secondary camp system**

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 C.I.A. 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 report 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 Quyét Tien, Thanh Phong, Bai, Ha Son Binh, and Tan Lap-Phu Tho.

### **'50 or more American prisoners'**

Here are excerpts from reports on the Quyét 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 Quyét 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.

"Based on analysis of polygraph 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."

### **'A special camp'**

Another intelligence report on Quyét 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 Quyét 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."

### **'We are Americans'**

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 Thuon 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 the unacknowledged POWs until the North Vietnamese chose to reveal them. 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 other 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.)

### **FOIA request**

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 of 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."

### **Senator John McCain**

One of Kerry's fellow debunkers, Senator John McCain, in a radio appearance the next day, brushed off the evidence as "raw files." The Arizona Republican, a cosponsor of the embargo-lifting resolution, said there couldn't have been a secondary prison system "because we would have known about it." But that's exactly what these documents 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 Rambos who attend this issue ..."

The Kerry-McCain resolution passed easily, 62 to 38, and though it was non-binding on the president, it gave him, in McCain's words, "political cover." Within 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 capitals, 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.

## **POW files**

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 material 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.")

## **Nixon tapes**

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."

## **Prisoners alive in 1986**

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 is held at all levels ... Practically all 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.”

### **Avoiding thoughts of Vietnam**

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.

Families of missing men 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 cases, broken in spirit.

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 SEREX 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 Henry Serex 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**

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 manmade 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.