

Spy Papers Back MIA Cover-Up Accounts

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Now another document has surfaced from Russian intelligence archives to tell us that the North Vietnamese were holding hundreds more American prisoners than they returned to the United States at the end of the war.

This news was in the morning papers yesterday, but it was played as a minor story — as the press has almost always played this scandal that has been covered up across the span of 20 years and five presidents, starting with Richard Milhous Nixon. Now it is in the hands of a sixth, and it will be one of the tests of Bill Clinton's character to see if he can bring himself to do what his five predecessors could not — tell the truth about these soldiers who were held behind by Hanoi for a ransom that never came and abandoned by Washington as expendables of Nixon's political agenda. It was an agenda, circa 1973, that demanded an exit as swiftly as possible from the Vietnam conflict.

The new document out of Moscow provides fresh affirmation of what another document from the same archives revealed to us earlier this year. That first document — brought to light in April by a Harvard scholar, Stephen Morris — revealed that Hanoi was holding several hundred more American prisoners than it was acknowledging to the Americans at the negotiating table in Paris. This wasn't merely a Soviet intelligence analysis, but rather a report by the North Vietnamese themselves, which was then translated into Russian and placed in the Moscow archives. Specifically, the document's heading described it as a top-secret report prepared by a senior North Vietnamese general, Tran Van Quang, and delivered to the Communist Party Politburo in Hanoi.

The Quang Report — dated Sept. 12, 1972, just four months before the signing of the peace accords — said that only some of the prisoners would be returned “at this time.” Others, said the document, 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.”

The Quang report said that Hanoi was holding 1,205 American prisoners. After the peace accords, only 591 men were returned.

The new document, handed over in recent days by the Russians to American officials in Moscow, says much the same thing as the Quang report – that Hanoi had in its custody hundreds of unacknowledged prisoners. It is described as a top-secret report presented by a Vietnamese official to a Communist Party meeting in late 1970 or early 1971. The official was named as Hoang Anh, secretary of the party's Central Committee. The figures Hoang Anh provided to the party gathering were 735 prisoners in detention and only 368 acknowledged. These numbers are lower than those of the Quang report, but the Quang report came roughly two years later, and hundreds more Americans had been captured in the meantime.

When the Quang document surfaced in April, the Vietnamese immediately called it a fake, and presumably they will offer the same predictable response to the new one. The Russians, on the other hand, say flatly that the documents — both of which came from the files of the GRU, Soviet military intelligence — are “authentic.”

The official American reaction is the most revealing. The Pentagon, which for 20 embarrassed years has thrown its best efforts into trying to debunk all information about the unreturned men, says it agrees with Moscow that the documents are authentic Soviet intelligence reports, but adds that the information contained in them is inaccurate.

What in the name of common sense is this supposed to mean? Is the Defense Department, so completely discredited over the years on this issue, now suggesting to us that 20 years ago the Russians deliberately mistranslated and distorted their reports from Hanoi? And if it wasn't the Russians who were planting this misinformation, are we supposed to believe that dissident Vietnamese officials were passing fake reports to unsuspecting Russian operatives, who then translated them and deposited them in Moscow's top-secret military intelligence files?

And then what? Is it the Pentagon's contention that the Russians, who are now opening their cold war archives to us bit by bit, are turning over documents containing fake information? For what purpose? To convince us of their utter ineptitude as intelligence gatherers? To confuse and displease us at a time when they are clearly seeking a cordial relationship and economic aid?

It is all too ridiculous. And yet the obeisant Washington press swallows the Pentagon's feeble croakings whole. The Washington Post, in its news story, called the documents “inexplicable.” The New York Times, describing the thinking of Pentagon officials, said: “... they were understood to believe that it [the new document]... was probably an authentic document, but referred to more American prisoners than could possibly have been captured.”

Is this the same Pentagon that announced, after Hanoi released the 591 prisoners and no more, that there were still 1,328 Americans missing and unaccounted for? That was March 29, 1973. The question 20 years later is the same as it was then: What happened to those men?

It is now a question for President Bill Clinton