

# Missing in Action: Will We Ever Know the Truth Behind the Vietnam Live-POW Claims?

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In February of 1994, almost 20 years after the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War, President Bill Clinton lifted the decades-old trade embargo that the United States of America had in place on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.<sup>[1]</sup> Shortly thereafter, in August 1995, President Clinton officially restored full diplomatic relations between the two nations.<sup>[2]</sup> Although these moves were praised by many American companies eager to do business in Vietnam, as well as some Vietnam Veterans, including a few prominent politicians from both sides of the political aisle, the move was largely opposed by scores of other Vietnam Veterans, their families, congressmen, and veterans' organizations such as the American Legion.<sup>[3]</sup> Central to this opposition were the many unresolved questions surrounding the fate of thousands of American servicemen still listed by the Pentagon as Missing in Action ("MIA") or Prisoners of War ("POWs") during the Vietnam War.<sup>[4]</sup> Those opposed to President Clinton's restoration of full ties with Vietnam did not believe that this longtime foe had been fully honest and forthcoming in accounting for the fate of *all* American POWs believed to be in Vietnamese hands at the time of the American military's withdraw from Vietnam.<sup>[5]</sup> Further, many contended that hundreds of American POWs were never released at the end of the War, and continued to be held in Vietnamese captivity for years after.<sup>[6]</sup>

Then, in 2016, while on a state visit to Hanoi, Vietnam, then-President Barack Obama announced that his administration was lifting the nearly five-decades-old U.S. arms embargo on Vietnam.<sup>[7]</sup> The lifting of this embargo allowed the communist government of Vietnam, with whom the United States fought a prolonged, bloody war in the not too distant past, to purchase the same high-tech American military aircraft, ships, and other weaponry available to longtime American allies in the region such as The Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan.<sup>[8]</sup> In fact, defense industry sources have already reported that Vietnam is very interested in acquiring surplus American F-16 fighter jets and Orion sub-hunter aircraft.<sup>[9]</sup> When the decision to lift the arms embargo was announced, there was palpable concern among many members of Congress, who would be called upon to approve any such future arms sales to this foe turned friend.<sup>[10]</sup> Several members of Congress expressed concern that, with the lifting of the arms embargo, President Obama had removed America's one remaining bargaining chip to force Vietnam's government to improve its human rights record, which has been at best questionable since the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>[11]</sup> Largely missing from this congressional discussion however, was any concern over resolving the decades-old claims by many Vietnam-era servicemen and

politicians that, when direct American involvement in the Vietnam War came to an end in 1973, hundreds of live American POWs were left to languish in Vietnamese prison camps.<sup>[12]</sup> Despite this apparent congressional indifference, the mystery of live American POWs left behind in Vietnam, or, rather, held back by the Vietnamese government at the end of the War, has persisted since the end of the War and continues to have a dedicated following among many Vietnam Veterans and their families.<sup>[13]</sup>

In the early 1990s, just before the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam, 2,202 United States servicemen were still officially listed as missing in Southeast Asia as a result of the war fought between the two nations in the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>[14]</sup> Among this number were approximately 135 American servicemen who, at the conclusion of American involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973, were listed as being held captive by what was then North Vietnam.<sup>[15]</sup> Although this number has been somewhat whittled down over the years, the question as to the whereabouts of most of these service members persists to this day.<sup>[16]</sup>

Inseparable from the question of *whether* any American servicemen were held back by the Vietnamese government at the end of the War is the question of *why* the Vietnamese would do such a thing. Practically speaking, it would have been much easier for the Vietnamese to simply release all American POWs in their captivity at the end of the War, or, as tragic as this sounds, quietly kill and bury any POWs that, for whatever reason(s), the Vietnamese did not want to acknowledge holding.<sup>[17]</sup> One of the most prominent and credible theories for why the Vietnamese might have held onto a select number of POWs is that, after the War, Vietnam planned on seeking war reparations from the Nixon Administration, with some even insinuating that President Nixon secretly promised such reparations-for-prisoners during the Paris Peace Talks that preceded the end of the War.<sup>[18]</sup> Further, another often-touted theory involves the Vietnamese government sending American POWs to their allies in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and North Korea to share with these allied powers the POWs' knowledge of American military tactics and weapons systems.<sup>[19]</sup>

Regardless of the Vietnamese government's reason for holding back live American POWs after the War's end, this theory continued to persist well after the War, and even continues to this day.<sup>[20]</sup> This notion of American POWs left behind in Vietnam has risen to mythical or cult-like status in some circles, even inspiring action movies starring the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris.<sup>[21]</sup> However, many other people who continue to espouse this belief are arguably both very knowledgeable and credible sources.<sup>[22]</sup> In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian President Boris Yeltsin confirmed that an undisclosed number of American POWs were shipped to the Soviet Union from Vietnam, and continued to be held in Soviet prisons long after the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>[23]</sup> This claim by the Russian president added credibility, because, at the time, many high-ranking U.S. government officials already acknowledged that the Soviet Union had done this with Americans captured in other Cold War hot spots, such as the Korean Peninsula.<sup>[24]</sup> Additionally, Command Sergeant Major (ret.) Eric L. Haney, a founding member of the elite U.S. Army Delta Force special operations group and current highly-regarded security and international affairs consultant, shared publicly that he believes American POWs were left behind in Vietnam after the War's end.<sup>[25]</sup> Haney stated that in the early 1980s he and his fellow Delta Force operators had reliable intelligence on the location of American POWs still alive in Vietnam, and were, on several occasions, days or even hours away from launching a rescue operation, only for the mission to be scrubbed at the last minute each time.<sup>[26]</sup> Further, Haney has even stated that, long after the War's end and these abandoned rescue attempts, he was asked very candidly by a senior Vietnamese

politician why the Americans never tried to secure the release of their remaining POWs after the War.<sup>[27]</sup> Finally, in the early 1990s, two United States Senators, John Kerry (D-MA) and Bob Smith (R-NH), both Vietnam Veterans themselves, each stated publically that there was strong evidence American POWs had remained in Vietnamese captivity after the War.<sup>[28]</sup> The senators made these statements after being part of an intense Senate investigation into the Vietnam POW/MIA issue, in which a senate select committee issued a detailed report that “held out the possibility that some U.S. soldiers had languished in [Vietnamese] hands for at least a period of time after the hostilities ended.”<sup>[29]</sup> Senator Smith even went so far as to say that he believed “that POWs and MIAs have been alive, or were alive [in Vietnam], up through 1989.”<sup>[30]</sup>

To this day, these claims remain largely unrefuted.<sup>[31]</sup> When President Obama announced the lifting of the long-standing arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016, there was noticeable opposition from many Vietnam Veterans and veterans’ organizations, who cited these yet to be resolved POW claims in their opposition to the lifting of the arms embargo.<sup>[32]</sup> However, as noted in the second paragraph above, opposition over the POW/MIA issue among members of Congress was conspicuously absent.<sup>[33]</sup> This congressional opposition, or rather lack thereof, is extremely important, as it is members of Congress who are responsible for approving any future arms sales to America’s once bitter foe.<sup>[34]</sup> Although the anti-Vietnam sentiment in Congress has mostly diminished, having been replaced with the desire to further open up emerging Vietnamese markets to American businesses,<sup>[35]</sup> and concerns over checking China’s rise as a military power in the region,<sup>[36]</sup> these new political priorities should not take away from the concerns of those Americans, however few, who still do not have a definitive answer as to the fate of their husbands, sons, brothers, and fellow soldiers. Were these American servicemen really left behind, or was the thought of those left behind eventually returning a way for many to hold onto some hope in what was a lost war? In either case, hopefully, if and when Congress is called upon to approve a major arms sale to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Congress will use what little bargaining power it has left and find the courage to finally demand a full accounting for *all* American servicemen that may have been left behind at the end of the Vietnam War.

<sup>[1]</sup> Alison Mitchell, *Opening to Vietnam, The Overview; U.S. Grants Full Ties, Time for Healing, Clinton Says*, NY Times (July 12, 1995), <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/12/world/opening-vietnam-overview-us-grants-vietnam-full-ties-time-for-healing-clinton.html>.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Id.*

<sup>[3]</sup> *Id.*

<sup>[4]</sup> *Id.*

<sup>[5]</sup> *Id.*

<sup>[6]</sup> See, e.g., Robert Tait, Phillip Sherwell, *Obama urged to press Vietnam over ‘missing’ US prisoners during historic visit*, The Telegraph (May 21, 2016), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/21/obama-urged-to-press-vietnam-over-missing-us-prisoners-during-hi/>.

[7] Krishnadev Calamur, *The End of the U.S. Arms Embargo on Vietnam*, *The Atlantic* (May 23, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/05/vietnam-arms-embargo/483872/>.

[8] See Luong Thai Linh, *US-Vietnam Relations Take Next Step as Arms Embargo Lifted*, *Newsweek* (May 23, 2016), <http://www.newsweek.com/vietnam-arms-embargo-lifted-462782>.

[9] Wendell Minnick, *Vietnam May Request F-16s, P-3 Orions From US*, *Defense News* (May 25, 2018), <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2016/05/25/vietnam-may-request-f-16s-p-3-orions-from-us/>.

[10] *Id.*

[11] *Id.*

[12] See Tait, et al., *Supra* n.6.

[13] *Id.*

[14] See Mitchell, *Supra*, n.1.

[15] *No Evidence Found of POWs in Vietnam*, *CQ Almanac* (1992), <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal92-1108641>.

[16] *Id.*

[17] See Tait, et al., *Supra* n.6.

[18] See, e.g., Barbara Crossette, *POWs Were Left, Top Aides Believe*, *NY Times* (Sept. 9, 1992), <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/22/world/pow-s-were-left-top-aides-believed.html>; Tait, et al., *Supra* n.6.

[19] See, e.g., Doyle McManus, Stephanie Grace, *Some Vietnam POWs May Be Alive in Russia*, *LA Times* (Jun. 16, 1992), [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-06-16/news/mn-472\\_1\\_vietnam-war](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-06-16/news/mn-472_1_vietnam-war).

[20] See Tait, et al., *Supra* n.6.

[21] See *id.*

[22] See, e.g., John Lancaster, *US Baffled by Yeltsin's POW Disclosure*, *The Washington Post* (Jun. 17, 1992), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/06/17/us-baffled-by-yeltsins-pow-disclosure/d20184a6-4fb8-495d-ab70-2c1b51d23a43/?utm\\_term=.d3ca5feb5e2d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/06/17/us-baffled-by-yeltsins-pow-disclosure/d20184a6-4fb8-495d-ab70-2c1b51d23a43/?utm_term=.d3ca5feb5e2d).

[23] *Id.*

[24] *See id.*

[25] Eric L. Haney, *Inside Delta Force*, 314-321 (Delacorte Press, 2002).

[26] *Id.*

[27] *Id.*

[28] *See* No Evidence Found of POWs in Vietnam, CQ Almanac (1992), <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal92-1108641>.

[29] *Id.*

[30] *Id.*

[31] *See* Tait, et al., *Supra* n.6.

[32] *Id.*

[33] Dan Boyer, *Obama lifts ban on selling U.S. arms to Hanoi in a bitter irony for Vietnam veterans*, The Washington Times (May 22, 2016), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/may/22/obama-weighs-selling-us-arms-to-hanoi-in-bitter-ir/>.

[34] *Id.*

[35] *See, e.g.*, Calamur, *Supra* n.7.

[36] *See* Boyer, *Supra* n.33.