

Eisenhower Knew of POWs In Soviet Union, Officer Says A Government Analyst Disputed The Assertion That About 1,200 Americans Were Held In The 1950's

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WASHINGTON — A retired Army lieutenant colonel said yesterday that President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered a coverup of evidence that the Soviet Union had imprisoned 1,200 U.S. POWs after the Korean War.

The assertion was cast as an exaggeration by a government analyst who doubted that more than 100 Americans could have been transported to Siberia after the war, and who said no documentary evidence had been found that the Soviets kept American POWs from the Korean War.

The charges and countercharges came as the Senate's special committee investigating prisoners of war opened two days of hearings on unaccounted-for Americans in World War II, the Korean War and the Cold War. Like previous hearings on Vietnam-era POWs, the session sparked flashes of emotion from committee members.

A grim-faced Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.), a former POW, abruptly left the hearing after saying the idea that Eisenhower would foster a POW coverup "strains my imagination."

But the committee's vice chairman, Sen. Robert C. Smith (R., N.H.), said: "I think the evidence is clear. They were left behind." As with the Vietnam POWs, Smith accused American officials, particularly at the Pentagon, of downplaying evidence of remaining POWs - if not actually abandoning them - for political reasons.

Smith said the U.S. government "has covered up what it knew (about Korean War POWs) through a pattern of denial, misleading statements and, in some cases, lies."

Pressure is growing among POW activists and some committee members, who believe they are uncovering a conspiracy or bureaucratic "mindset to debunk," to extend the committee beyond its scheduled demise at the end of the year. "It is frustrating to be under a one-year deadline," Smith said.

Officially, there are 8,177 U.S. military personnel who never returned from the Korean War. That number includes POWs who died in camps, servicemen lost at sea, those buried by Americans in Korea, and people whose fates remain unknown.

The most sensational testimony came from retired Lt. Col. Philip Corso. He said he briefed Eisenhower in the Oval Office in 1954 on evidence that two or three trainloads of American POWs were shipped from Korea to the Soviet Union. Corso served on the National Security Council staff from 1953 to 1957.

Corso said he recommended, and Eisenhower agreed, that the POWs' families should not be notified because the prisoners "were going to be exploited in a very sinister way."

"The big policy was fear, fear of general war," Corso said.

Still, Corso said he later did mention the POWs in a speech he wrote for the U.S. ambassador to deliver at the United Nations, although that speech was not widely reported by the news media.

At a news conference Monday, called in part to publicize a new book on POWs, Corso charged that the media ignored the Korean War POWs because top reporters on many newspapers were working for the CIA.

Paul Cole, a Rand Corp. analyst researching POWs for the Pentagon, said he believed that some Americans were sent from Korea to the Soviet Union, based on interviews with Soviet citizens, although he had no other evidence.

But Cole disputed private investigations suggesting that thousands of American POWs were abandoned after the Korean War and World War II.

Except for the 100 or fewer Korean War POWs who might have been transported to China or Russia, Cole said, most Americans missing after the Korean War died in battle or captivity.

Cole particularly criticized claims that 23,000 Americans, one-fourth of the total American POWs in the region, were taken into the Soviet Union after World War II.

When the Soviets turned over Americans found in German prison camps after the war, the American military actually was surprised to receive 14,000 more than had been estimated, he said.