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An 'All-Purpose Attack' on POW Activists

One can only wonder what impelled The Post to publish "MIA Hunts by Citizens Annoy U.S." [Jan. 7], an all-purpose attack by government officials on live POW activists that did not include any effort at balance or determining opposing viewpoints.

Unnamed "interest groups" are accused of spreading "misinformation" that there are live POWs in Indochina. Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe stated on the Dec. 15 edition of "60 Minutes" that "usable proof" (a rigorous government definition) existed during his 1979-81 tenure as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency that live prisoners of war were being held in Indochina. Now, with the intelligence data base having more than doubled since then, U.S. officials say the proof isn't there. This is the "significant progress" that the administration claims?

With the administration having backed off the conclusion that had been reached by 1981, it is a wonder that it can claim to be in "the best position we've ever been in to resolve the issue." It is evident from the article (with its exclusive focus on crash-site excavations, site surveys, etc.) that the only thing our negotiators are resolving is the return of remains, not resolution of the live POW question.

Private groups of Americans are blamed for "trashing" crash sites; the fact is that this practice has long been carried out by Indochinese citizens, without the benefit of American encouragement. It is responsibly estimated, for example, that as many as 70 percent of all remains not in Vietnamese government warehouses may have been secreted away by villagers hoping for favorable immigration status.

The bulk of the article is devoted to an attack on Mark Smith and Melvin McIntire, two highly decorated Green Berets who have instituted a lawsuit alleging the existence of perhaps 200 live POWs. The Post uncritically quotes extensively from an anonymous two-page "fact sheet" that various U.S. officials have been circulating.

The "fact sheet" contends that the intelligence developed by Smith and McIntire is hearsay. "60 Minutes" noted that two Thai officers slipped into a POW compound in Laos and photographed five American POWs. An affidavit was given in the lawsuit by another agent who has adopted an alias to protect his identity. A businessman who has traveled widely in Laos has seen, photographed and/or spoken with perhaps 100 American MIAs. Some hearsay!

Smith and McIntire state that they have more than 40 names of live POWs. The "fact sheet" counters that perhaps as many as four names don't correlate. Smith swore he had about 50 agents in place; the "fact sheet" argues that three of them have given unreliable information.

The U.S. officials complain that refugees, allegedly motivated by promises of rewards, have identified as a captive "Morgan J. Donahue, an Air Force crewman who was involved in a mid-air plane collision. . . . U.S. authorities say that Donahue was almost certainly killed." What's the basis of this certainty? He wasn't killed in the collision. He is classified as a Category 2 MIA, "Suspect-Enemy Knowledge," not as a Category 4 or 5, which would be appropriate for a collision casualty. Donahue's father, who has a graduate degree in criminology and a substantial background in security, was able to interview his son's pilot a week after the incident. He learned that the pilot, upon regaining consciousness after the nighttime collision, ascertained that no one else was still on board the aircraft. He ejected and saw other descending parachutes below him.

Another major attack was launched on Col. Jack Bailey, president of Operation Rescue (the name refers to the boat people, not to POWs). It commences with the demonstrably untrue insinuation that this highly decorated veteran is engaged in a "rip-off." In fact, Bailey has longstanding ties with Indochinese resistance groups, who have on occasion smuggled out hard evidence of live POWs, most recently a photograph taken in 1985 and positively identified by a family member.

The officials assert that Bailey turned over remains which an "official analysis . . . revealed . . . were a mixture of human and pig bone fragments." The "official analysis" came from the Central Identification Laboratory, which is presently under investigation for unsound forensic techniques and for suspected manipulation of evidence.

Operation Rescue insists it turned over both a complete skull and a partially complete skeleton. Additionally, this coalition identified a host of discrepancies in both the report and the follow-up correspondence with the Pentagon. The Pentagon refused to answer to these comments, except to refuse our demand for an independent examination of the remains. Instead, it orchestrated a campaign of inuendo in veterans' media and other constituencies where Operation Rescue might be expected to find support.

The officials omit to mention that, of the four sets of identified remains from Laos tendered before 1985, three were turned in by Operation Rescue in conjunction with Lao resistance forces. On June 8, 1985, five complete skeletons were turned over in Hawaii, but CIL refuses to confirm or deny identifications.

Overall, the article seems timed to blunt the impact of the filing of 13 new affidavits in the Smith and McIntire case. The new allegations include:

- In 1981, a rescue mission was considered in the Oval Office.
- Of a National Security Agency listing of 300 POWs, assembled from intercepted Vietnamese communications, only 5 percent of them were returned in 1973.
- DIA disregarded a considerable body of intelligence volunteered from Hmong refugees.

Wouldn't this material have made a better front-page story than the petulance of U.S. officials?

—William T. Bennett

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