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Vietnam: Adjusting Its Strategy on the POW/MIA Issue

An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by
Office of East Asian Analysis, with a contribution
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**Vietnam: Adjusting Its Strategy
on the POW/MIA Issue**

Scope Note

When Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) fell to the Communists on 30 April 1975, more than 2,500 US military personnel throughout Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were listed by the Department of Defense as prisoners of war (POWs), missing in action (MIA), or killed in action with bodies not recovered; the majority of these—1,919—were lost in Vietnam. This paper examines Hanoi's evolving attitude toward the POW/MIA issue and its use of the issue in diplomatic negotiations with the United States. It neither attempts to deal with Hanoi's handling of individual POW/MIA cases nor strives to examine evidence concerning the existence of POWs or MIAs in Vietnam, a responsibility of the US Department of Defense POW/MIA Office.

Vietnam: Adjusting Its Strategy on the POW/MIA Issue

Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 10 January 1992
was used in this report.*

During the past four years, Vietnam has become more cooperative in resolving questions concerning US military personnel reported as possible prisoners of war or missing in action (POWs/MIAs) in the Vietnam war. The government has made several important gestures since 1988, including:

- Turning over more remains and material evidence than during the preceding 13 years.
- Participating, for the first time, in joint investigations of sites where American planes crashed or missing US servicemen were last seen. Fifteen joint investigations—on nearly 260 sites—had been conducted by yearend 1991.
- Beginning in 1990, giving US experts limited access to military museums and archives containing records detailing Vietnamese investigations of American losses.

We doubt that Hanoi has any interest in resolving the issue on humanitarian grounds. Instead, we believe Hanoi's cooperation has been sparked by its impression that relations with the United States are warming, albeit at a slower pace than Vietnam would like, and is fueled by Hanoi's desperate need to attract financial assistance to improve the sagging Vietnamese economy. We believe Hanoi is primarily interested in access to badly needed funds from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; Hanoi probably hopes a more cooperative attitude on the POW/MIA issue will weaken US resistance to the loans.

As long as Hanoi believes it will eventually gain economic benefits, we believe it will stick to its policy of limited accommodation. But, at the same time, we expect Vietnamese leaders will use levers—such as propaganda and contacts with the US business community—to press Washington to move faster in improving economic ties.

As the Vietnamese continue to chip away at the US-sponsored economic embargo, however, US leverage over Hanoi—and thus Washington's ability to wrest new concessions on the POW/MIA issue—will diminish. US pull would virtually disappear if major international financial institutions such as the IMF or World Bank began lending substantial sums to Hanoi. Indeed, the Asia Development Bank's decision in late December 1991 to resume technical aid to Vietnam may be the first sign that such funds will be forthcoming.

But cooperation on the POW/MIA issue could still falter even without a breakthrough in international aid. Vietnam has always been sensitive to bilateral atmospherics, and Hanoi would not welcome widely publicized US condemnation of its policies in the international media. The Vietnamese are already unhappy with the US "roadmap" outlining Washington's step-by-step plan for normalizing relations, and Hanoi would react strongly if it believed Washington were raising new barriers to normalization. Demands in US policy circles or even in the US press, for example, that Hanoi address human rights issues not stressed in the roadmap or provide a complete accounting for every missing American soldier, a feat Hanoi claims is impossible, could affect Vietnam's cooperation on POW/MIA issues.

In addition, Hanoi will remain focused on its sovereignty and internal stability, particularly in the wake of developments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Hanoi is likely to resist a significant increase in the number of US POW/MIA investigators in the country, particularly because the leadership believes that the United States is behind the problems that Communism has experienced elsewhere in the world. Finally, ongoing debate within Vietnam's foreign policy community over the pace and scope of improving relations, combined with a struggle over who has the final authority in determining Vietnam's foreign policy, could result in fluctuations in Hanoi's attitude toward cooperating on POW/MIA matters.

Even under the best of circumstances, there are limits to what the United States could expect to achieve. The fact that more than 400 servicemen were lost over water and the complete destruction of some airplane crash sites, for example, make it impossible to account for all missing US personnel. Hanoi's cooperation would also be constrained by a shortage of logistic support, such as helicopters, especially if the number of US investigators in Vietnam increased dramatically.

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Vietnam: Adjusting Its Strategy on the POW/MIA Issue [redacted]

POW/MIA Policy Then . . .

Since 1975—when bilateral negotiations to resolve the issue of missing Americans in Vietnam began—Vietnam has used the POW/MIA issue to push a variety of political and economic agendas with the United States. In the early years, Hanoi used the threat of withholding remains as a weapon against the United States. Vietnamese leaders appeared confident in their ability to use the MIA issue to ensure that concessions contained in the 1973 Paris accords were met: first and foremost, US economic aid, and second, US support for (or at least noninterference with) Hanoi's attempts to establish itself as the legitimate government of Vietnam. When Vietnam first applied for admission to the United Nations in 1975, for example, [redacted]

[redacted] government had agreed to release the remains of three US pilots. After the United States cast its veto, [redacted]

[redacted] permission had been withdrawn. The second veto in September 1976 brought an official letter from the Vietnamese UN observers, blaming American "hostility" for the stalemate between the two countries. [redacted]

After the United States announced in May 1977 that it would neither provide reconstruction aid nor would veto Vietnam's application to the United Nations—if MIA investigations were expedited—Hanoi expanded its aid demands. The Vietnamese subsequently announced the names of 20 more MIAs whose remains were to be released, but waited until Vietnam was admitted to the United Nations in September 1977 before allowing repatriation of the remains. [redacted]

Following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, Hanoi claimed it would revitalize stalled bilateral negotiations on the MIA issue if the United States recognized the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh. When the United States did not recognize the regime, Vietnam used MIA meetings to denounce US policy. During the second of two

meetings in 1981, for example, [redacted]

[redacted] castigated the United States for backing Chinese aggression in Cambodia, unfairly holding Vietnam totally responsible for resolving the MIA issue, and violating the Paris accords. By mid-1984, the Vietnamese had returned fewer than 100 sets of remains of US servicemen. [redacted]

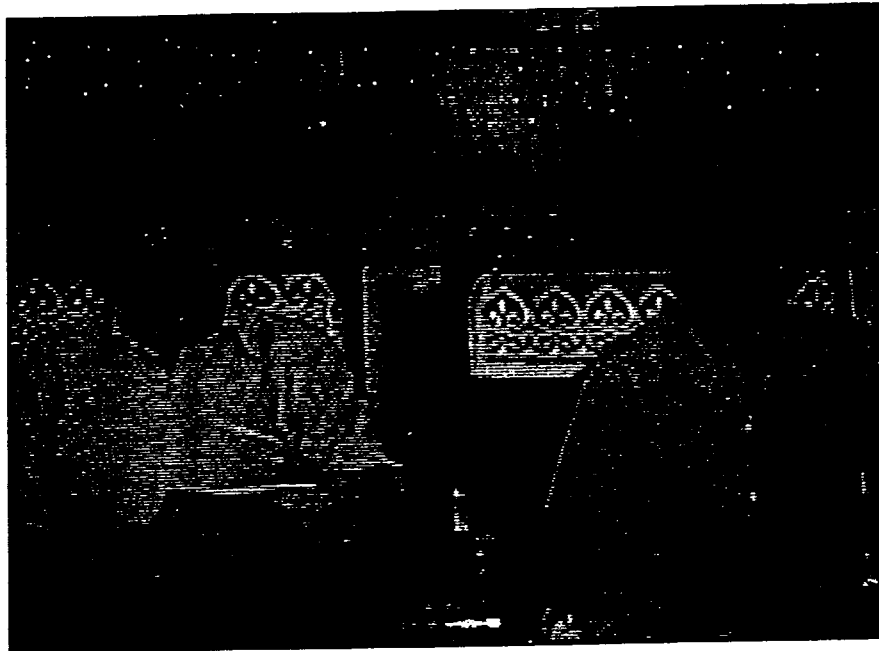
Vietnam's attempts to manipulate the United States through changes in its MIA policy continued through the mid-1980s. In April 1986, Hanoi cancelled a meeting between Vietnamese and US POW/MIA technical experts to protest the US bombing of Libya. Before the visit to Hanoi in 1987 by Gen. John Vessey, the newly appointed Special Presidential Em-issary for POW/MIA and other Humanitarian Issues, Hanoi said—for the first time since 1978—that it would halt cooperation on the POW/MIA issue until the United States provided aid. Analysis of press reports at that time suggests Hanoi's tougher line reflected growing domestic criticism that the policy of cooperating on MIAs was not bringing many benefits to Vietnam. [redacted]

. . . and Now

During the past several years, Vietnam has continued to use the POW/MIA issue for political purposes, but has taken a more conciliatory approach. Hanoi has not threatened to halt cooperation on the POW/MIA issue or suspended site exploration activity since late July 1988, when it postponed the investigation of discrepancy cases following what Hanoi considered were hostile remarks made by a US official.¹ Nor is

[redacted]

Figure 1. US Special Emissary General Vessey meets with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam to discuss cooperation in resolving the POW/MIA issue. [redacted]



Hanoi linking its willingness to cooperate to US guarantees of economic aid. In late October 1991, for example, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai told foreign journalists that the Vietnamese view the issue as a humanitarian matter that both parties have agreed to separate from other political issues [redacted]

While there is no evidence that the Vietnamese leadership has any real interest in resolving the issue on humanitarian grounds, Hanoi's new strategy has indeed yielded positive results for the United States:

- Since 1988, more American remains and material evidence related to the fate of individuals lost in Vietnam have been returned than during the preceding 13 years. The official number of American POW/MIAs unaccounted for in Vietnam has fallen to 1,656 MIAs, reflecting over 260 cases officially closed by the US Government since 1973.
- In 1988, Vietnam began permitting joint investigations of sites where American planes crashed or missing US servicemen were last seen, and by yearend 1991, 15 investigations—on nearly 260 sites—had taken place, [redacted]

- In July 1991, Hanoi made an unprecedented gesture in response to a US request that Hanoi investigate photos allegedly depicting American MIAs living in Indochina: the government agreed to publicize the pictures in the Vietnamese media. In mid-October 1991 newly appointed Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet met for the first time with the daughter of an MIA—who allegedly appeared in one of the controversial photographs—to discuss her father's case.
- Perhaps most important, the Vietnamese in the past year began giving American researchers limited access to documents stored in museums and military archives, including two records detailing Vietnamese investigations of American military losses. In July and October 1991, Vietnam also handed over parts of a classified Vietnamese report about war-time antiaircraft operations. American investigators confirm some of these documents contain information on military identification cards, dog tags,

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Figure 2. US and Vietnamese forensic experts examine alleged POW remains provided by a grave robber. [redacted]



personal effects, and reports on the fate of Americans who died in captivity.² [redacted]

Closer bilateral work in resolving the POW/MIA issue has not moved forward at a uniform pace, however. [redacted]

[redacted] the Vietnamese often promise more cooperation than they are willing or able to deliver. In November 1989, for example, Vietnamese technical

² During the war, North Vietnam established a nationwide organization to investigate crashed aircraft, capture and process US prisoners of war, bury remains, and report to central authorities, [redacted]

experts, with no apparent political motivation, initially refused to research or discuss 32 discrepancy cases that senior Vietnamese officials had agreed to examine during meetings with General Vessey in October; work on the discrepancy cases moved forward again by early 1990. In addition, the Vietnamese continue to restrict domestic travel—which limits the ability of US officials to investigate quickly reports of live sightings of American POW/MIAs—despite earlier assurances that US officials would be able to go anywhere in the country once they notify Vietnamese officials [redacted] the Vietnamese, although willing to provide excerpts of some wartime documents, are not prepared to fully disclose information found in these documents, making it

Cooperation Elsewhere in Indochina

Cooperation with the United States on POW/MIA issues has also moved ahead, albeit in fits and starts at first, in the other Indo-Chinese countries. In 1982, the United States established a dialogue with Laos, where more than 500 Americans are listed as missing, and, since 1984 some 37 sets of remains have been returned to the United States, all identified as American MIAs. Nonetheless, in 1984, Vientiane delayed joint excavation of a crash site for almost a year after a group of US citizens—claiming they had official US support—made an illegal cross-border foray from Thailand. Cooperation resumed in 1985, but slowed again in 1986, as Vientiane apparently followed Hanoi's lead in objecting to the US bombing of Libya and later protested Washington's decision not to certify Laos as cooperating in counternarcotics efforts. Since late 1987, Laos has demonstrated a greater commitment to resolving POW/MIA matters by unilaterally excavating a crash site, allowing an increasing number of joint crash site excavations, and agreeing in 1991 to implement the first year-round work plan to resolve POW/MIA issues.

[redacted] Lao motives for addressing the POW/MIA issue are similar to Vietnam's; the Lao are desperate for outside economic assistance

and are eager to procure American aid. Humanitarian gestures by the United States, such as the US construction of two schools in areas near joint MIA investigations, appear to be well received in Vientiane, [redacted] and may spark additional cooperation, but real progress will remain constrained by Vientiane's shortage of skilled labor and the government's insistence that investigation teams use state-owned helicopters to support investigations.

[redacted] In Cambodia, where US officials believe 83 MIAs were lost, the Phnom Penh regime did not cooperate with the United States on MIA issues during the 1980s, demanding that the United States first recognize it as the legitimate government of Cambodia. In 1991, the regime—probably in an attempt to increase its legitimacy as a Cambodian peace settlement neared—agreed to allow joint excavation of two crash sites, and eight sets of remains have been returned to the United States for identification. [redacted] Phnom Penh, like Hanoi and Vientiane, probably hopes cooperation on MIAs will encourage the United States to provide economic assistance for reconstruction. [redacted]

difficult to resolve POW/MIA cases. Finally, some Vietnamese officials may be stringing out the accounting process either to fill ministry coffers or for personal financial gain; [redacted]

major concession by the United States, [redacted] Vietnamese press reports suggest that Hanoi viewed the US administration's agreement that same year to send prosthetics teams to help Vietnamese injured in the war as an important step toward addressing "urgent Vietnamese humanitarian concerns." [redacted]

Economic Aid: The Great Incentive

[redacted] we believe Hanoi's more cooperative posture on the POW/MIA issue was sparked by its perception that Washington was considering upgrading relations with Vietnam. Hanoi apparently viewed General Vessey's appointment in 1987 as a

But it is Vietnam's desperate need for economic assistance that appears to be the driving force behind the progress. Vietnam—already one of the world's poorest countries—faces rising unemployment, triple-digit inflation, and a rapid decline in assistance from its primary benefactor, the former Soviet Union. In

1987, Moscow provided Vietnam with a record \$1.6 billion in economic aid, including all of its gasoline, diesel fuel, and cotton-fiber imports, and 70 to 90 percent of its fertilizer and steel. Economic aid declined 13 percent in 1988 and has continued to fall sharply since then; we believe Soviet aid ceased in 1991. Bilateral trade has also suffered as Moscow in 1990 began demanding that Vietnam pay hard currency for Soviet goods [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] Senior leaders in Hanoi, including former Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach—who before he was replaced in June 1991 was considered the architect of Hanoi's more flexible policy toward the United States—probably believe the more conciliatory posture on POW/MIA issues is necessary to improve Vietnam's international image and attract US and Western investment. [redacted]

Perhaps most important, we believe a number of Vietnamese leaders hope that movement on the POW/MIA issue will weaken Washington's resolve to continue blocking Vietnam's access to badly needed funds from the IMF and World Bank. Vice Foreign Minister Le Mai's comments in November during his first meeting with US officials on normalization suggest that Hanoi's primary interest is not to establish diplomatic relations with the United States but to gain access to funds from these international financial institutions as soon as possible. [redacted]

[redacted]

As long as the Vietnamese believe that cooperation on the POW/MIA issue will eventually lead to renewed

**Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach
Leaves His Mark**

The personal involvement of former Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, a strong advocate of improving relations with the United States and the West, played a leading role in Vietnam's willingness to address the POW/MIA issue. [redacted]

[redacted]

Thach expressed bitterness about Vietnam being forced to serve as an "industrial garbage dump" for the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and noted how important improving relations with the United States would be and how hard Hanoi had worked to search for American MIAs. [redacted]

We believe Thach probably assured Hanoi's senior leadership that progress on the POW/MIA issue, coupled with the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, would bring quick normalization of bilateral relations. When this proved untrue and when China made Thach's removal a condition for improving Sino-Vietnamese relations, Thach lost both his foreign ministry portfolio and his Politburo ranking during the Seventh Party Congress in June 1991. [redacted]

economic aid and investment, we expect Hanoi to stick to its policy of limited accommodation. However, we doubt that Hanoi will rely on the POW/MIA card alone to achieve its goal. The Vietnamese press, for example, frequently highlights the expansion of diplomatic and commercial relations with various countries, including France, Australia, Great Britain, Germany, and most ASEAN members, implying that Washington is falling behind in establishing commercial ties and losing valuable economic opportunities. It

pointed out, for example, that, during his trip to Vietnam in November 1991, French Foreign Minister Dumas pledged to double France's investment in Vietnam to about \$17 million and to help Hanoi restore its standing with international financial organizations. The Vietnamese press praised Australia for lifting its investment embargo against Vietnam in October 1991 and announcing plans to resume direct bilateral aid worth about \$4 million for the first year, [redacted]

Hanoi apparently hopes these developments will encourage US business groups to press Washington to move faster in improving relations and lifting economic restrictions. [redacted] recently told members of the US commercial community [redacted] that they should encourage Washington to speed up the bilateral normalization process. [redacted]

[redacted] The publicity Hanoi's press gave to a recent five-year agreement Vietnam signed to buy 500,000 metric tons of wheat at market prices from Australia—making Australia the biggest wheat supplier to Vietnam—may be another attempt to encourage US farmers to press for the removal of restrictions or risk ceding markets for agricultural imports to other producers, in our view. [redacted]

Declining US Leverage

As the Vietnamese continue to chip away at the US-sponsored economic embargo, US leverage over Hanoi—and thus Washington's ability to wrest new concessions on the POW/MIA issue from the Vietnamese—will diminish. US leverage would virtually disappear if major international financial institutions such as the IMF or World Bank began lending substantial sums to Hanoi, although the Vietnamese would almost certainly continue to seek US investment and access to US markets. Indeed, the Asian Development Bank's decision in late December 1991 to resume technical aid to Vietnam—the first multilateral bank assistance to Vietnam since 1978—may be the first sign that such funds will be forthcoming.

Vietnam Manipulating the Oil Industry To End the US Embargo

We believe some Vietnamese officials may have attempted to use the lure of lucrative offshore oil contracts to put pressure on Washington to lift the international embargo. In early 1991, [redacted] and the press reported that the state-run oil company Petrovietnam was attempting to quietly reserve concessions for US companies pending a lifting of the embargo. [redacted]

Nonetheless, Hanoi's deepening economic problems make oil exploration a high government priority, and we expect Hanoi to press to lease some of the potentially most productive acreage sometime this year. [redacted]

More recently, Italy announced it will provide \$80 million in aid over the next few years, including \$10 million as part of a bridge loan that France is trying to arrange to help Vietnam repay its arrears to the IMF. [redacted]

Moreover, cooperation may falter even without a breakthrough in international aid to Vietnam. The Vietnamese have always been sensitive to atmospheric issues, and the leadership is already unhappy with the

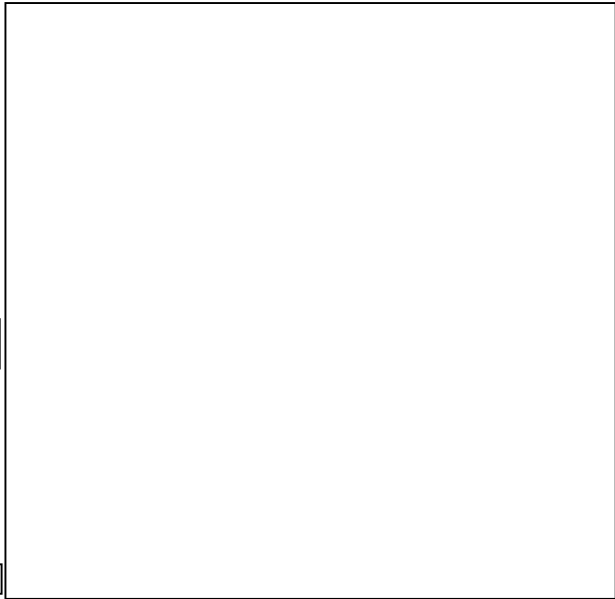
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Figure 3. US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon and Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister Le Mai meet to discuss normalization of US-Vietnamese relations.

Hanoi has also accused Washington of "moving the goal posts" for normalization and could be expected to react negatively if any additional issues—such as human rights—were raised during any debate in US policy circles or even in the US press. Vietnamese leaders have demanded that Washington establish the "right atmosphere" by not criticizing Hanoi, thus establishing Washington's "good will,"

The Vietnamese press, recapping recent US Senate hearings on POW/MIA investigations, claims that elements in the United States are clearly "using obsolete anti-Vietnamese sentiment as a trump card in their gamble to obstruct the normalization of US-Vietnamese relations." Vice Foreign Minister Le Mai also claims Washington is interfering in Vietnam's relations with third countries by linking, for example, certain aspects of US-Japanese relations to Tokyo's willingness to suspend aid to Vietnam until the MIA issue is solved.



US "roadmap," presented in April 1991, which ties POW/MIA cooperation to Washington's four-stage process for normalizing relations. Vietnam has never formally accepted or rejected the US roadmap,

and there are many indications that Vietnam strongly objects to the way it was presented, viewing it as a US ultimatum. During Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach's meeting in April 1991 with General Vessey on POW/MIAs and other humanitarian issues, he hit hard at the US roadmap, claiming that it was a mistake to impose conditions on normalization and calling for the United States to put the roadmap aside.

Le Duc Anh appears to be playing a larger role in formulating foreign policy since the removal of former Foreign Minister Thach; the new Foreign Minister, Nguyen

Manh Cam, is not a Politburo member and does not have the clout that Thach had, [redacted]

[redacted] This uncertainty within the foreign policy community suggests to us that Hanoi's policy toward the United States—and thus its willingness to cooperate on POW/MIA issues—is still subject to change, and we cannot rule out a less accommodating attitude as the struggle within the leadership unfolds.

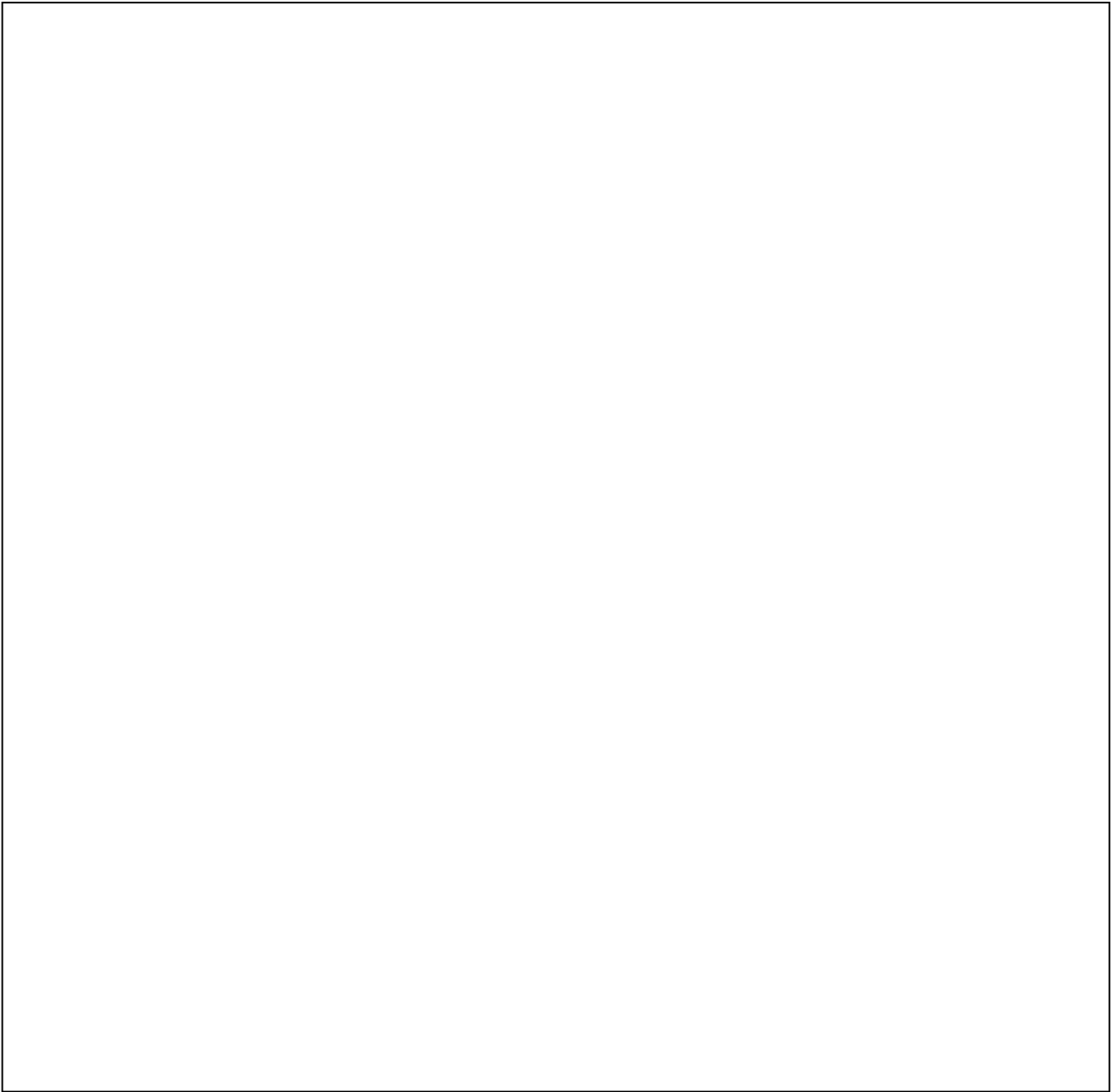
[redacted]

Even under the best of circumstances, however, there are limits to what the United States could expect to achieve. The Vietnamese have pointed out that the loss of more than 400 servicemen over water and the complete destruction of some airplane crash sites makes it impossible to account for all missing US personnel. Hanoi's cooperation could also be constrained by a shortage of helicopters and other logistic support, especially if the number of US investigators

in Vietnam increased dramatically. Moreover, the issue of Vietnamese sovereignty will remain paramount in Hanoi's dealings with Washington, and we doubt that the Vietnamese would for the foreseeable future be willing to grant unrestricted and immediate access to people, documents, or locations. [redacted]

[redacted] The leadership is extremely concerned about the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and blames the United States for the unrest there. Vietnam has experienced minor antigovernment demonstrations over the past few years as the population became restive over poor economic conditions. Hanoi is unlikely to allow foreigners, particularly US officials, to regularly visit the countryside out of fear that they may encourage further disturbances. [redacted]

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Appendix

Chronology of POW/MIA-Related Events

1973

January

United States and North Vietnam sign the Paris accords, committing the United States to withdraw its troops and Vietnam to respect the cease-fire. Hanoi provides list of all POWs in North Vietnam and repatriates them within the stipulated 60 days.

February

Talks begin on US economic aid to North Vietnam.

September

Hanoi announces it will not search for individuals missing in action (MIAs) while South Vietnam holds political prisoners.

1975

April

Hanoi releases names of three dead MIAs to US Senator.

June

Premier Pham Van Dong offers to normalize relations with United States, provided Washington honors obligations of reconstruction aid.

August

[redacted] Hanoi will turn over three sets of remains, but offer is withdrawn after United States vetoes Vietnam's UN application.

December

Vietnamese [redacted] again links aid to MIAs and offers to turn over three sets of remains.

1976

March-August

United States and Vietnam exchange notes on normalization; United States stresses MIA accounting as precondition; Vietnam stresses US aid obligations.

July

Hanoi labels President Ford's speech to the National League of POW/MIA Families "slandrous" and accuses Ford of electioneering.

- September** Hanoi announces second try for UN seat and turns over list of 12 MIAs killed in North Vietnam, the first such release since April 1975. Hanoi again charges that President Ford is using MIAs for electioneering.
- November** US-Vietnamese delegations negotiate on MIA cooperation in Paris.
- December** US Congressional Committee reports belief that no US personnel are being held alive in Indochina and recommends United States begin direct discussions with Hanoi to gain fullest possible accounting of MIAs.
- 1977**
- March** US Presidential Commission receives special treatment in Vientiane and Hanoi. Vietnam pledges to cooperate in resolving MIA issue, but there is little tangible evidence of change.
- May** United States announces it will not veto next Vietnamese application to UN if Hanoi speeds up MIA investigations; bilateral talks resume. Congressional resolution prohibits US aid to Indochina, except for humanitarian aid.
- June** Vietnam announces names of 20 MIAs.
- September** Vietnam gains UN seat; remains of 20 MIAs repatriated.
- 1978**
- June-August** Hanoi drops claims that the MIA issue is related to other unresolved issues between the two countries.
- July** Personnel from Vietnam's Office for Seeking Missing Persons (VNOSMP) and US Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) meet in Hawaii to discuss MIA issue.
- August** Congressional team visits Vietnam and Laos; four remains promised from Laos, 14 from Vietnam.
- December** Vietnam invades Cambodia and US-Vietnamese bilateral discussions break down.

1979

August US Congressional delegation finds Hanoi willing to talk but not to compromise on resolving the POW/MIA issue.

1981

February JCRC and VNOSMP meet in Hanoi.

June JCRC and VNOSMP meet; three MIA names released.

December Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) visit Hanoi to discuss MIAs.

1982

February Joint US Government–National League of POW/MIA Families delegation goes to Hanoi to discuss MIAs.

May Vietnam releases four MIA names to VVA.

September JCRC–National League of POW/MIA Families group visits Hanoi and Vientiane; Laos allows them to visit crash sites. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach subsequently announces acceptance of quarterly technical meetings.

December Technical experts meet in Hanoi and inspect crash site.

1983

February JCRC delegations visit both Hanoi and Vientiane; Hanoi provides information on 12 MIAs.

October US official and the Executive Director of the National League of the POW/MIA Families hold unannounced session with Thach to discuss breaking the deadlock in MIA negotiations.

1984

January Indo-Chinese Foreign Ministers draft a communique—which cites their countries' willingness to cooperate on the MIA question if the United States renounced its "hostile policy"—to press the United States to grant de facto recognition to the Phnom Penh regime.

February US Government mission visits Hanoi and reaches agreement with Thach to accelerate cooperation and delink the POW/MIA issue from US-Vietnamese relations in other areas. Vietnam agrees to focus initial efforts on the most accessible cases in Hanoi area and those listed as having died in captivity in southern Vietnam.

1985

April US delegation to Hanoi discusses Vietnamese plan to resolve the POW/MIA issue within two years.

September US official and Vietnamese Ambassador meet in New York to exchange views on Vietnamese two-year workplan.

November Vietnam agrees to allow first joint excavation of a B-52 crash site near Hanoi.

1986

January US Assistant Defense Secretary leads highest-level delegation to Hanoi in over 10 years. Agreement is reached to resolve the problem of missing US servicemen within two years and to consider the MIA issue a humanitarian question.

Vietnam pledges to investigate claimed live sightings of American servicemen.

US Senator leads Congressional delegation to Vietnam, the first since 1975, and discusses Vietnam's two-year plan with Thach and visits site of joint excavation for American remains.

February

March

April

Hanoi cancels meeting between Vietnamese and US technical experts in protest over US military operations against Libya. This follows Vietnamese allegations that Washington has refused to formally participate in Hanoi's two-year plan to resolve the MIA issue.

- July** US delegation to Vietnam formally backs the two-year plan.
- October** US delegation meets with senior Vietnamese official, charging two-year plan is going too slow, and Vietnamese policy decisions are not being implemented at the technical level.
-
- Director of the US Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii leads delegation to Hanoi for talks with Vietnamese experts and to visit a crash site.
- Former US Secretary of State leads delegation to meet with Thach on MIAs.
- 1987**
- April** Vietnamese reiterate claim that slow progress on MIA issue reflects lack of US cooperation on Vietnamese two-year plan.
- May** US delegation to Vietnam met by low-level official, suggesting a cooling in the Vietnamese attitude toward the United States.
- June** Hanoi links progress on MIA issue to US aid for the first time since 1978.
- July** Vietnam's Prime Minister expresses doubt that bilateral relations with the United States would improve during the Reagan administration, but notes that Vietnam would consider allowing the United States to establish a liaison office in Vietnam for handling POW/MIA issues.
- August** US delegation led by the President's Special Emissary General Vessey meets Thach in Hanoi. Vietnamese renew pledge to cooperate and to treat POW/MIA issue as a separate humanitarian matter. United States agrees to facilitate private humanitarian assistance; Vietnamese press says visit marks a significant step toward reconciliation. Foreign press claims Vietnam achieves political coup in linking humanitarian assistance to cooperation on MIAs.
- September** Vietnam issues official complaint regarding US Defense Department comments that Vietnam is holding back information about MIAs.
- Vietnam turns over the possible remains of three American soldiers.

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December

US officials meet acting Vietnamese UN representative to discuss progress on POW/MIAs and other humanitarian matters. United States tells Vietnamese representative about growing frustration in Washington with meager progress on resolution of POW/MIA issue.

1988

January

Thach claims US Government should provide humanitarian assistance to Vietnam because it is cooperating in searching for MIAs. US spokesman responds that US policy prohibits direct government assistance to Vietnam and notes that Hanoi's cooperation on POW/MIAs has been disappointing.

US and Vietnamese technical experts meet and share information on 23 MIA cases.

June

Thach meets with Vessey in New York to discuss MIAs, the settlement of Vietnam's humanitarian issues, and the status of newly released reeducation camp inmates.

June-July

Vietnamese delegation visits JCRC and the US Army Identification Center in Hawaii for the first time to review technical cooperation on MIAs.

July

Thach sends letter to Vessey renewing Hanoi's pledge to solve 70 priority MIA cases before the end of 1988 and asking United States to strictly implement its promise to address Vietnam's humanitarian issues.

Hanoi postpones investigation of discrepancy cases, claiming it is offended by remarks of US Assistant Secretary of State.

August

Thach indicates joint US-Vietnamese surveys of possible crash sites can get under way.

September

US Colonel leads delegation in joint US-Vietnamese search for MIAs.

October

United States ships humanitarian supplies including medicines and vaccines to Vietnam.

Vessey meets with Thach in New York to discuss MIAs.

Joint US-Vietnamese MIA search conducted.

November US Defense Department thanks Vietnam for repatriating 23 possible American MIA remains, mostly obtained by unilateral Vietnamese operations—sixth transfer of remains since Vessey's 1987 visit.

Thach agrees to Vessey's proposal to increase the number of joint MIA search teams.

December Vietnam returns 38 possible MIA remains.

1989

January Vietnam reaffirms commitment to consider the search for American MIAs as a humanitarian act.

Fourth joint US-Vietnamese search for missing American servicemen.

Vietnamese press highlights a US document that reportedly concludes that there is no proof of living American POWs in Vietnam.

March US and Vietnamese officials carry out fifth search for American MIAs.

April Vietnam turns over 21 remains of possible MIAs.

June Sixth joint search for MIAs. Vietnam hands over 28 sets of remains.

July-August Seventh joint search for MIAs. Preliminary investigations completed on all 70 of the priority discrepancy cases outlined by Vessey in 1987.

October Eighth joint search for MIAs.

Vessey meets Thach in Hanoi to discuss humanitarian issues for first time since 1987. Both sides agree to expand joint cooperation to resolve the MIA cases; 32 additional cases raised by Vessey.

November Vietnamese in meeting with American specialists say they are unwilling to address the additional 32 discrepancy cases.

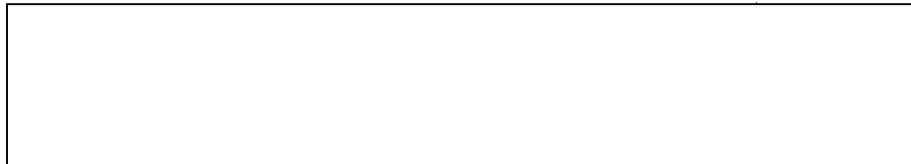
December US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State meets with Vietnamese UN Ambassador in New York to discuss POW/MIA progress. Hanoi is concerned that the United States is delaying closure of jointly investigated cases for political reasons and emphasizes its commitment to full cooperation.

1990

February-March

Ninth joint investigation for MIAs.

March



April-May

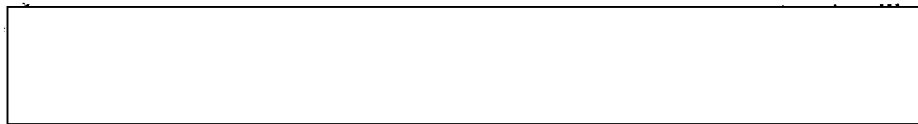
Tenth joint investigation for MIAs.

July

Vessey sends Thach a letter expressing US disappointment with the pace of MIA searches and investigations. Thach replies that Vessey's negative tone is surprising given recent positive bilateral assessments of the issue. Thach also complains about US accusations that Vietnam lacks a serious commitment to cooperate and is storing American remains.

August

Eleventh joint search for MIA remains.



September

US officials meet Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister in New York to discuss expanding the bilateral dialogue, especially on POW/MIA issues.

Secretary of State Baker meets with Thach in New York to discuss bilateral relations, the highest-level meeting since 1975. Two issues—accounting for POW/MIAs and establishment of a stable government in Cambodia—are cited as blocking normalization of relations. Vietnamese press cautions that normalization will not occur quickly.

October

Thach meets with Vessey for the first time in Washington to discuss MIA issue. Thach pledges cooperation in accelerating resolution; Vietnamese press claims the meeting was particularly fruitful.

Thach agrees to Vessey's proposal to station a US representative in Vietnam to deal with MIA issues.

November

Vietnam hands over remains collected in 11th joint MIA search.

Twelfth joint search for MIA remains.

1991

February

Thirteenth joint search for MIAs.

March

Vietnam turns over seven sets of recently discovered remains believed to be those of American MIAs.

April

US Senator, a former POW, leads delegation to Vietnam to push for resolution of MIA issue.

US official presents Vietnamese UN Ambassador in New York with "roadmap" outlining US conditions for normalization, including satisfactory progress on the POW/MIA issue.

Vessey announces during visit to Vietnam that Washington will open a temporary office in Hanoi to work on MIA cases.

US announces that it will give Vietnam \$1 million for prosthetic devices for amputees, the first direct US aid to Vietnam since 1975.

May

Department of Defense personnel establish temporary POW/MIA office in Hanoi. US officials begin examining Vietnamese museum artifacts and military records related to US MIA cases.

Vietnam agrees to US Senator's request to grant permits for US veterans' organizations to set up an MIA liaison office in Hanoi and to allow American MIA families to come to Vietnam to join in the search for MIAs.

June

Staff of new US MIA office leaves Hanoi at Government's request as Hanoi prepares for Seventh Party Congress.

July

State Deputy Assistant Secretary leads POW/MIA team to Hanoi to discuss photos reportedly of living MIAs. Vietnamese officials demonstrate willingness to move quickly on remaining POW/MIA discrepancy cases by rapidly responding to US requests to publicize the photo of an alleged MIA in the Vietnamese press and on television.

US and Vietnamese officials in Bangkok note improved cooperation on POW/MIA issue over the past two years.

July-August

Fourteenth joint search for MIA remains.

August

Vietnam asks Vessey to delay trip scheduled for September because of Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam's busy schedule. [redacted]

[redacted]

Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister comes to Washington to meet with Vessey and US Senators on the POW/MIA issue.

October

Vessey returns for fourth visit to Hanoi since 1987 to discuss POW/MIA issues. He announces that he will recommend that the temporary POW/MIA office in Hanoi be made a permanent office but warns that both sides still have room for additional cooperation.

Cam calls for greater US flexibility and an end to US hostility toward Hanoi. Claims Vietnam has been doing its best to meet Washington's conditions for normalizing ties.

November

Fifteenth joint search for MIA remains.

1992

January-February

Vessey's fifth visit to Hanoi to discuss POW/MIA issues.

[redacted]