

EIR Feature

How Kissinger betrayed American POWs in Indochina

by Edward Spannaus

Public hearings held by the Senate Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs have provided extensive evidence that U.S. servicemen were abandoned in Indochina as the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. The principal responsibility for this criminal conduct lies with Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser, who was the chief negotiator of the Paris peace agreements for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

There exists overwhelming evidence that Kissinger's duplicitous conduct resulted in the failure of the United States to obtain the release of as many as 350 servicemen who were missing or captured in Laos. Overall, 2,538 American servicemen were listed as missing in action (MIA) in April 1973—the time of "Operation Homecoming" when all prisoners of war (POWs) were supposed to be released. A staff report of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee estimates that an additional 2,500 men were missing in covert or "black" operations—making a total of over 5,000, or twice the official number.

One of the major reasons for the failure to obtain an accounting of POWs and MIAs in Laos was that the war in Laos was conducted clandestinely by the CIA rather than the military. The U.S. never acknowledged a presence in Laos, and the CIA's clandestine operations both before and after 1973 were heavily financed by funds from opium production and trade. This is a major reason for the coverup of the POW-MIA issue which has been carried out for almost 20 years now.

The Paris agreements

Henry Kissinger's method of operation was to use his position as national security adviser to bypass both the State Department and the Defense Department in conducting foreign policy. Vietnam was but a pawn in Kissinger's geopolitical games, of which the "China card" and détente with the Soviets were principal features. It is well documented that Kissinger believed that the United States was in decline and the Soviets in ascendancy; from the moment he came into office in



Left to right: Lawrence Eagleburger, Lt. Col. Richard Secord, Henry Kissinger. For this gang at the State Department, Pentagon, and CIA, the prisoners of war were just a pawn in Kissinger's geopolitical game.

the first days of the Nixon administration, his perspective was to withdraw from Vietnam and hand that unfortunate country over to the communists.

The Paris negotiations between Kissinger and North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho began on July 19, 1972. The first North Vietnamese proposal was that lists of POWs would be exchanged on the day of the signing of a peace agreement, and that all POWs would be released on the same day that all troops were withdrawn.

The U.S. counterproposal, made on Aug. 17, contained the same provisions except that it included all military personnel and civilians captured anywhere in Indochina.

Fine and well. But on the same day, Kissinger told South Vietnamese President Thieu that he didn't want the prisoners released! He was afraid that North Vietnam would call his bluff and release the prisoners, compelling a U.S. cessation of bombing and a withdrawal. "In fact, I prefer that they don't return the prisoners of war and that there is no cease-fire before the election," Kissinger told Thieu.

This continued to be Kissinger's consistent policy throughout the negotiations.

On Jan. 23, 1973, the peace agreements were initialed, and they were signed on Jan. 27. The POW list which the North Vietnamese provided at that time did not include any POWs held in Laos. The U.S. objected, and as a result the North Vietnamese provided another list a few days later, which only listed 10 POWs captured in Laos but held by the North Vietnamese. It did not contain any POWs held by the

Pathet Lao.

There was a side agreement—not part of the formal treaty—which stated that the North Vietnamese would be responsible for obtaining the release of all POWs held in Laos, and that this would be done within 60 days.

The Pathet Lao apparently had other ideas. On Feb. 19, 1973, a Pathet Lao spokesman announced that they were holding American POWs and that they would be released when a cease-fire agreement between the U.S. and the Pathet Lao was reached. Even the State Department was compelled to admit that this was inconsistent with Kissinger's statements that all POWs from Laos would be released in Hanoi.

Not only was there no agreement with the Pathet Lao, but there was not even a cease-fire. During the 60-day cease-fire period specified in the Paris accords, U.S. airmen were still flying combat missions over Laos and being shot down! And then Kissinger proposed to Nixon intensive U.S. air strikes in southern Laos to commence March 16.

Up to March 26, North Vietnam repatriated 591 POWs. On that date, North Vietnam said that the U.S. demand that it release POWs captured in Laos was beyond the scope of the Paris agreements.

The disappearing POWs

Documents released by the Senate committee, from the period of the 60-day cease-fire, demonstrate how the issue of the Laos POWs was swept under the rug.

A Feb. 6, 1973 "Talking Points" paper prepared by the

Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) for Kissinger to use in his continuing discussions with the North Vietnamese stated the following:

“There are approximately 350 U.S. military and civilians listed as missing or captured in Laos. Of this total, approximately 215 men were lost under such circumstances that the enemy probably has information regarding their fate.” The memorandum also pointed out that the list of 10 POWs (9 Americans, 1 Canadian) from Laos were POWs captured by

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the North Vietnamese, not the Pathet Lao.

A second version of the Feb. 6 memorandum was prepared on March 21, 1973, in response to requests from Roger E. Shields, an assistant to Lawrence Eagleburger, who was assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs at that time. This version was both edited and then further redacted by blacking out key sections. Since this was to be used as a guidance or “talking points” for dealing with the news media, it appears that the blacked-out sections were not to be discussed with the press. In the March 21 version, the reference to 350 missing personnel is blacked out. Also eliminated is the statement, “There are several individuals known to have been captured, but their names did not appear on the list”—that is, the list provided by Hanoi.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam was suspended the next day. Adm. Thomas Moorer sent out an order suspending all troop withdrawals until all conditions were met; that order was just recently declassified.

However, the day after that, March 23, Moorer sent out a followup message proposing a compromise and directing the withdrawals to continue so that the March 28 deadline could be met. The Moorer message, a copy of which was sent to Eagleburger, said that it would be sufficient to have only the 10 listed POWs released by March 28, and then discussion of the others would be pursued afterwards. “The purpose of the above is to get things on track and moving again,” said Moorer. (The discussion of other POWs was to continue afterwards, even though Kissinger wanted to escalate the bombing of Laos!)

A memorandum for Eagleburger was also drafted on this same date, March 23, by Lt. Col. Richard Secord, the former CIA operative in Laos who later figured prominently in the Iran-Contra scandal. The Secord-Eagleburger memo takes note of the DIA listing of 350 missing military and civilians

in Laos, but admits that the United States is willing to accept the release of the 10 listed POWs “as the final condition for complete U.S. withdrawal.”

However, the memorandum continues, “we still have the Laos MIA question remaining unresolved,” and what is proposed is a series of diplomatic moves to deal with the matter of the other 350 missing personnel. Among the diplomatic moves proposed are that “all future reconstruction assistance should be described as wholly dependent upon the accounting for and/or release of U.S. prisoners being held in Laos.”

On March 25, the North Vietnamese stated that the matter of the Laos missing and captured servicemen was beyond the scope of the Paris agreement.

On March 28, a slightly revised version of the Secord-Eagleburger memorandum was sent over now-Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson’s name to Henry Kissinger. (During this period, when the Watergate scandal was breaking, the occupant of the position of secretary of defense was constantly in flux, giving Kissinger and Eagleburger much more control over the entire process.)

On March 28, President Nixon gave a televised nationwide address declaring that “all of our American POWs are on their way home.” While Nixon added that there were still difficulties on compliance on MIAs in Laos and Cambodia, the clear emphasis was that there were no more live POWs in Indochina, and this is the way his announcement was interpreted.

‘They’re all dead’

Part of the process of “disappearing” the POWs was to turn them into MIAs or KIAs (killed in action). The Defense Department comptroller had compiled a list of about 80 POWs whose existence was confirmed from witnesses, photos, etc. On Feb. 11, Kissinger presented a list of 80 discrepancies from the large list provided from Hanoi. Apparently nothing ever happened with this list.

The DOD comptroller’s POW list contained 81 “currently captured” military personnel on March 31—after all POWs had allegedly been returned. During the month of April, the weekly DOD compilation ranged from 75 to 80.

About two weeks after Nixon’s announcement that all POWs were on their way home, he met with Pentagon POW specialist Roger Shields. The next day, Shields made a public statement, “We have no indication at this time that there are any Americans alive in Indochina!” A few days prior to this, there had been an encounter between Shields and Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements, during which Shields had told Clements of the evidence that there were still live POWs in Indochina. Clements told Shields in no uncertain terms: “I don’t believe you hear me Roger, they’re all dead.”

This, then, became the official line: that there were still problems in the accounting for MIAs, but that all POWs were dead. Official Pentagon policy became defense of that position, with massive efforts undertaken to discredit any-