The US POW Experience, American Veterans, and the War

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The American prisoner of war (POW) experience dominates American understandings of the Vietnam War. That was true during the war, when American POWs "became the objects of a virtual cult," as reporter Jonathan Schell wrote at the time. It became even more true after the war, when American POWs and their missing-in-action (MIA) counterparts overshadowed far larger populations touched by the war, including other American veterans. As the war's more immediate horrors faded from view, the suffering of American POWs, real and imagined, still featured in presidential rhetoric, congressional hearings, and US diplomacy; in movies, television, books, and the popular press; and on POW/MIA flags in the public square. From John McCain to John Rambo, POWs were made surrogates for all Americans who served in Vietnam: "All our sons in Vietnam are POWs," declared the antiwar group Another Mother for Peace in 1971. They became stand-ins for all Americans in relation to that conflict: "We're Still Prisoners of War," *Newsweek* wrote in 1985. Half a century on from the war, their prominence has faded but not disappeared. In November 2019, US President Donald Trump signed the National POW/MIA Flag Act, enacted by Congress with unanimous consent, which mandated that the black-and-white banner, emblazoned with the words "You Are Not Forgotten," must be flown whenever the American flag flies at the White House, the US Capitol, and other federal buildings and national monuments, including every US post office.[1]

All this was unusual. In the annals of American warfare POWs were more often scorned than lionized. Indeed, Trump's 2016 run for the White House recalled this tradition: "Does being captured make you a hero?" Trump asked

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1 This chapter draws on research and ideas presented at greater length and in different form in Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009). "All our sons" from ibid., 14, 40; "We're Still Prisoners of War," *Newsweek*, April 15, 1985.

of McCain at the time. "He's not a war hero, because he was captured," sneered Trump. "I like people that weren't captured."[2] Such talk was common before the Vietnam War, but shocking after it as POWs emerged as the lost war's principal paragons. Eight American prisoners of the Vietnam War received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for military valor, representing 3 percent of Vietnam veterans to receive that distinction. Two dozen were promoted to the rank of admiral or general. Three were elected to Congress, two to the Senate, and two were named US ambassadors. Admiral James Stockdale, among the highest-ranking and longest-held American POWs, was Ross Perot's running mate in his 1992 presidential bid. And McCain was the Republican nominee for president in 2008 and nearly claimed that prize in 2000.[3]

Such prominence is more remarkable still given the small number of Americans captured in Indochina – under 800 total, with 591 imprisoned until war's end. Their numbers were negligible compared with the numbers captured in earlier American wars – over 130,000 Americans were interned in World War II and some 7,000 in Korea. So too was their population dwarfed by the 58,000 Americans killed in Indochina and the 303,000 Americans wounded there, not to mention the 200,000 or more Vietnamese POWs held by the US-backed Republic of Vietnam (RVN), a group that attracted little notice at the time or since.[4]

Finally, the cult of American POWs is odd given that these men were strikingly unrepresentative of the 3.4 million Americans who served in the Vietnam War, and their experience bore little resemblance to that of other Vietnam veterans. Consisting mostly of downed aviators, the prisoners were older, whiter, better educated, and better paid than most American troops; most were officers, not enlisted men; most were married, many with children; and most spent the better part of a decade in strict confinement and material hardship while other American service personnel cycled in and out

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2 Felicia Sonmez, "Donald Trump on John McCain in 1999," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2018; Philip Rucker, "Trump Slams McCain for Being 'Captured' in Vietnam," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2015.

3 Jamie Howren and Taylor Baldwin Kiland, *Open Doors: Vietnam POWs Thirty Years Later* (Washington, DC, 2005), 151–66 provides a compendium of the honors won by and distinctions bestowed upon American POWs.

4 Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Annapolis, MD, 1999), appendices 1 and 3; Department of Veterans Affairs, "America's Wars," November 2020: www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf. Vietnamese POWs discussed in Jeremy Kuzmarov, "Modernizing Repression: Police Training, Political Violence, and Nation-Building in the 'American Century,'" *Diplomatic History* 33 (2) (2009), 215–19.

of Vietnam on twelve-month tours defined by constant motion and material abundance. Their differences with millions more draft-eligible Americans who never served in Vietnam were greater still. Donald Trump, who used a bone-spurs diagnosis to avoid being captured by the war, was closer to the norm than was John McCain, who was born in 1936, a decade prior to the baby boom that supplied such a surplus of men to fight – or, more often, not to fight – in Vietnam.[5]

But if Trump represented the predominant American experience in the Vietnam era, McCain and his fellow POWs offered a more flattering portrait, which is why the POW experience, however unusual, loomed large in American memory while more typical but less attractive dimensions of that experience faded from view. War remembrance works to "direct human memory from the horrors to the meaningfulness and glory of war," historian George Mosse once wrote.[6] In that sense it was precisely the anomalous character of the POW experience that made it central to American memory. In a war that was disorienting, disheartening, and divisive for Americans, the POW experience was simple, legible, uplifting, and potentially unifying, especially for the nation's white majority, which identified most closely with the war, its warriors, and the nation's war-making traditions. Who and what the POWs represented was clear in part because the POWs were a small, homogenous elite, with little of the diversity or dissent that defined so much else in the war. They were patriotic white men who stood for the heroism and sacrifice of white men and their families in the fight against nonwhite revolutionaries. In that sense they stood for the nation as its ruling white majority preferred to imagine it. Unlike the rest of the war, which called into question the nation's hegemonic beliefs and practices, the POW experience reified nationalist values, validated counterrevolutionary ideology, and reaffirmed a crusading US foreign policy.[7]

Who was responsible for POW captivity was also clear: Asian communists and Americans who sympathized with such racialized revolutionary

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5 See Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993), 17–28 for discussion of "the Vietnam generation's military minority." On the sociology of American POWs, see Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (New York, 1993), introduction. For more characteristic American military service in Vietnam, see Meredith Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).

6 George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990), 50.

7 Most scholars who have written on the POW issue have made similar claims. For one early and insightful example, see Elliot Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993).

foes, especially those in the antiwar movement, the student left, the Black Freedom Struggle, women's liberation, and other reform movements. The prospect of POW suffering reversed culpability for the war, indicting Asians who suffered under American bombs while exonerating those who bombed them, even as sympathy for POWs served to absolve American architects of the war and impugn their critics, all while inciting more war. If US policy and those who made it caused their capture, their long and brutal captivity drew attention away from that fact and linked their Vietnamese captors to slavery and barbarism while associating Americans with freedom and nobility. And POW survival promised the resurgence of American power after US defeat, along with the return of racial and gender hierarchies and patriotic values that the POWs personified. Such clash-of-civilizations tropes made captivity narratives among the most popular expressions of early American nationalism amid clashes with indigenous peoples. During and after the Vietnam War such settler-colonial storylines, preserved in Cold War cinema such as John Wayne's 1956 film *The Searchers*, resurged as a way to make sense of US defeat in Asia without abandoning the national and racial chauvinism that inspired Americans to invade Vietnam in the first place.[8]

"We now have some heroes in this war!" US President Richard Nixon exulted as the POWs returned in 1973, a tacit admission that none of the other Americans who served in Vietnam fit the heroic profile – at least, not in his view. "They must be used effectively," he told his staff; they "could have a great impact on the destiny of this country." Making effective use of war heroes, or martyrs, to shape the nation's destiny is precisely what Mosse meant when he wrote about turning public consciousness from the horrors to the glories of war. As Nixon grasped, POWs were important because they gave Americans something the lost war otherwise denied: "the sense of men redeemed, the satisfaction of something retrieved from the tragedy," as *Time* magazine put it.[9]

But if Americans were drawn to POWs in hopes of redemption, some embraced them as avenging angels who would set right what went wrong in Vietnam. Here, too, their exclusivity mattered, since POWs represented not

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8 These claims were given their earliest and most direct expression by H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America: How and Why Belief in Live POWs Has Possessed a Nation* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993). On captivity narratives in the "American war story," see Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York, 1995).

9 Nixon quoted in Allen, *Last Man*, 66; Lance Morrow, "A Celebration of Men Redeemed," *Time*, February 19, 1973.

just the nation's white majority but the loss of power and position that the nation's defeat visited upon white Americans, especially white working-class men, who made up the bulk of the US military in Vietnam. Black Americans were overrepresented in combat infantry units and died in disproportionate numbers in the war's early years, when ground fighting was most intense. Still, 87 percent of Vietnam veterans were white, as were 85.5 percent of Americans killed in Vietnam, at a time when 87 percent of Americans were white. And most of the white men sent to Vietnam were poor and working-class.[10] What white men lost in the war, white POWs would restore. Like Christ on the cross or the Gettysburg dead, POW martyrs redeemed white male sins so that white men could resume their place of leadership in their families, their communities, their workplaces, the nation, and the world.[11]

Yet because much of what changed during the war was welcomed by many Americans or, even if unwelcome, proved irreversible, POWs and their MIA counterparts became talismans in a "politics of loss" that blamed wartime defeat for white dispossession and used POW/MIA advocacy to resist both. True, these men were imprecise symbols for Vietnam veterans. But their undeniable suffering resonated with those still fighting various lost causes after the war, particularly in white working-class and veteran subcultures where POW/MIA activism and iconography were most pronounced, even as their redemption held out hope for final victory.[12]

Cold War Icons

None of this was anticipated in March 1961 when Army Major Lawrence Bailey bailed out of a flaming C-47 troop transport over northeastern Laos, becoming the first American POW in what came to be called the Vietnam War. Part of the new Kennedy administration's beefed-up but undeclared

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10 Appy, *Working-Class War*, 17–38; Richard A. Kulka et al., *Contractual Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study* (Research Triangle Park, NC, 1988), II-3.

11 Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), chapter 1; Allen, *Last Man*, chapter 2 treats these themes.

12 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (Oakland, 2021), and Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca, 2013), among others, discuss how defeat in Vietnam gave rise to an aggrieved conservatism among white Americans. I called this the "politics of loss" in *Last Man*. Here I invoke "lost causes" to draw attention to the ways in which the politics of loss resembled the Lost Cause ideology of the white South after the civil war, a theme explored in *Last Man*, 113–18.

"secret war" against communists operating in and passing through Laos on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail between North and South Vietnam, Bailey was the first of six Americans captured there that year. Five of those six survived until their release in August 1962, which came soon after the United States signed the International Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, ending US combat operations there for a time. But if their war was over, their experience set the pattern for hundreds of Americans captured over the next twelve years as the United States expanded its anticommunist fight from Laos to Vietnam. Four of those first six American POWs were onboard US aircraft shot down over communist territory in an air war of dubious legality. Three of the six were officers, two were enlisted men, and one was an NBC correspondent. Five of the six were born before World War II, averaging 31 years of age at the time of capture. All were white, all were men, and all suffered injury, illness, deprivation, and brutal treatment. Army Captain Walter Moon, wounded in the fighting that led to his capture and injured further in an escape attempt, was shot dead for intransigence.[13]

These patterns would define the American POW experience in Vietnam. Army Captain Floyd Thompson, aged 31, was shot down on a reconnaissance flight in March 1964, becoming the first American POW who would be held until the Paris Agreement on Vietnam was signed in January 1973. Like most Americans captured in Vietnam – and like most Laos captives before him – Thompson was an officer lost over enemy territory, not an infantryman captured in ground fighting. With few fixed battle lines or protracted battles, ground combat in Vietnam produced relatively few casualties that could not be recovered. This meant that 84 percent of American POWs were downed aviators, and that most were captured and held in North Vietnam, where the United States conducted extensive bombing over the first four years of the war and again in its final year, but where US ground forces never operated, making search-and-rescue efforts impossible. Even in South Vietnam, where fewer Americans were captured, nearly half of American POWs were shoot-downs like Thompson.[14] Given that military aircraft were operated by officers, 88 percent of American POWs were officers, like Thompson. And given that most officers at the time were white, so were 95 percent of American

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13 Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chapter 3.
14 Of the 5,353 American airmen shot down in Indochina, 51 percent were recovered through US search-and-rescue operations, 10 percent were captured, and the remainder were missing or killed without being recovered. Airmen also represented 81 percent of all missing US military personnel. House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Final Report Together with Additional and Separate Views*, 94th Congress, 2nd session, 1976, 45, 205.

POWs. As officers, these men were also older and better educated than most Americans in Vietnam, with navy pilots averaging 30 years of age when captured. And since most were captured early in the war, before the 1968 bombing halt over North Vietnam, but were held until 1973, after the Paris Peace Accords, they exited the war far older than other veterans, having served for far longer. Like McCain, captured in 1967 when he was 31 years old, most came of age in the 1950s, not the 1960s. And given their more advanced age, two-thirds were married, many with children. "Never before in the history of mankind had such an unusual group of prisoners been gathered," wrote one. And all that made them distinctive was most pronounced among those shot down first, who came to define the POW experience because of, not despite, their extraordinary character.[15]

In an ill-considered, ill-defined, ineffectual war fought mostly by poor and working-class "grunts" fresh out of high school, POWs were sympathetic figures. Their age, education, and family status, along with their glamorous service, elevated rank and pay, and unmistakable whiteness, distinguished them from US ground forces in Vietnam, making them more comparable to middle-class, middle-aged Americans, and thus more admirable in their eyes. They possessed all the hallmarks of Cold War America's idealized self-image, which they sustained, even burnished, in a time of challenge. Before being shot down, for instance, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Robinson "Robbie" Risner, a 40-year-old World War II veteran and Korean War ace, and father to eight children, was featured on the April 23, 1965 cover of *Time* magazine "as the classic example of the kind of dedicated military professional who was leading the American effort in Vietnam." "The US effort in Viet Nam must be measured in terms of quality, not quantity," it continued. "The American serviceman in Viet Nam is probably the most proficient the nation has ever produced."[16]

The desire for all this to be true only intensified among *Time*'s middle-class readers during Risner's seven years in captivity, as less gratifying images of Americans in Vietnam came to the fore. Indeed, Risner and men like him became even more attractive once relegated to Hanoi's prisons, becoming victims rather than perpetrators of the war. More than troops in the field, white middle-class aviators who were removed from battle but still trapped in the war made perfect stand-ins for white middle-class Americans in a long and bitter fight they were unable to win yet unable or unwilling

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15 Allen, *Last Man*, 41–3; "Never before" from Howes, *Voices*, 7.
16 "Armed Forces: The Fighting American," *Time*, April 23, 1965.

to end. As hero–victims, POWs reflected American ambivalence about the war, allowing those Richard Nixon named the "Silent Majority" to grieve the war's costs without giving up on it or openly protesting it.

From Precious Sons to Criminal Air Pirates

Their distinctive profile mattered not only in America: it had a direct bearing on the POW experience inside Vietnamese prisons. As *Nhân Dân*, Hanoi's Communist Party newspaper, explained, "to lose one of these 'precious sons'" created "anxiety over losing someone whose worth cannot be calculated, such as military secrets which he possesses and the loss of morale by his friends." If Americans saw POWs as "precious sons," North Vietnamese considered them "criminal air pirates" waging an illegal war of aggression against a sovereign state and its civilian population. Communist efforts to make this case, outlined in a seventy-seven-page dossier titled *US War Crimes in North Vietnam* that North Vietnam published in February 1966, moved Hanoi's jailers to seek admissions of guilt from downed American pilots. To secure confessions, authorities used both sticks and carrots, promising preferential treatment and early release to cooperative captives while treating the obdurate to solitary confinement, reduced rations, sleep deprivation, ankle stocks, stress positions, rope torture, and beatings, all with an eye toward proving American criminality before the world.

Because the Hanoi prisoners were military officers with deep commitments to the US military, the Vietnam War, and the broader Cold War struggle, not to mention an engrained sense of their own national and racial superiority, they refused voluntary cooperation, leading to widespread abuse of American POWs between 1965 and 1968 as US bombing intensified and the numbers of American prisoners grew. Together with the serious injuries most pilots suffered during shootdown, physical and mental abuse made these years a time "when hell was in session," as Navy Commander Jeremiah Denton titled his prison memoir. After US President Lyndon Johnson authorized heavy bombing near Hanoi in June 1966, North Vietnamese authorities marched Denton, Risner, and other Americans through the streets, where angry crowds hurled insults at them – and sometimes rocks and fists – screaming "Death to you who have massacred our dear ones." Meanwhile Southern communists announced the execution of first one then two more American POWs in June and September 1965 in retaliation for the public execution of communist POWs by the US-backed Saigon government, prompting the International

431

Committee for the Red Cross to urge "all authorities" to abide by Geneva Convention protections for prisoners of war.[17]

Such abuse has defined American understandings of the POW experience ever since. The suffering that American prisoners endured was seen at the time and since as a sort of martyrdom, even a saintly act. But while the torture of prisoners was real and cannot be excused, it is often exaggerated in popular accounts and must be contextualized. First, it should be emphasized that all prisoners of the Vietnam War suffered abuse, deprivation, and disease, and that the Saigon government inflicted worse treatment on vastly larger populations of political prisoners than anything Americans endured, and it did so with the support of the US government.[18] More broadly, the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia faced more lasting and lethal violence in the form of US combat operations, which cost some 3 million Asian lives. Indeed, 20 percent of American POWs held in South Vietnam died in captivity, compared with 5 percent in the North, thanks not to greater abuse by their captors but to the greater dangers resulting from living among Southern communists under relentless pursuit by US forces.[19] To communist officials, the violence that Americans unleashed on North Vietnam, a sovereign state, without a formal declaration of war vacated American claims to Geneva Convention protections. "You are not considered a prisoner of war but fall under the policy of a criminal of war," one Vietnamese interrogator told an American. If most Americans and their government dismissed such reasoning, some legal experts did not, noting that North Vietnam signed the Geneva Convention with an express "Nuremberg reservation" that it would not apply to those guilty of crimes against humanity. Even American POWs found it difficult to answer "What would have happened if we were bombing the United States and one of our pilots was shot down over Pittsburgh?" as one was asked. This question gained credence in the United States and around the world as American bombing grew in scale, scope, and ferocity, and any analysis of the POW experience must acknowledge that the asymmetric violence of US bombing, together with the fact that most POWs were pilots who volunteered to carry out mechanized warfare against a largely defenseless

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17 Howes, *Voices*, part I, and Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chapters 8–11 provide detailed histories of torture inside Hanoi's prisons, and abuse dominates POW memoirs.

18 Kuzmarov, "Modernizing Repression"; Howes, *Voices*, 54; Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York, 2015), 111.

19 For relative POW mortality rates, see Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 230–2; Howes, *Voices*, 6.

population, helps to account for prisoner abuse.[20] Finally, it should be noted that abuse of American prisoners was not constant throughout the war but diminished over time. Amid international backlash to the forced march through Hanoi, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) President Hồ Chí Minh affirmed that his government's policy "with regard to the enemies captured in war is a humanitarian policy." After 1966, mistreatment lessened, though it did not fully end until 1969.[21]

Hanoi moderated its strongarm tactics because those tactics backfired, bringing condemnation even from sympathetic corners, such as the Red Cross. Though it is true that the US air war against North Vietnam was of questionable legality and dubious ethics, abuses of American POWs violated Geneva Convention protections – as did Saigon's brutality toward its political prisoners – and all such violence was abhorrent. Fundamentally, it was impossible for Hanoi to seize the moral high ground by abusing American prisoners. American pilots knew this and did all they could to publicize their mistreatment as a counteroffensive against communist claims. In May 1966, for instance, Denton famously blinked the word "TORTURE" in Morse code as he was being interviewed by a Japanese television reporter in a session his captors had arranged with the expectation that he would criticize US bombing, something he refused to do once on camera. Such performances did more harm than good to the communist cause.

Faced with such resistance, communists moved to using early release rather than abuse to win propaganda points. This approach worked best in the South, where a more diverse POW population with more enlisted infantrymen was more willing to follow their captors' lead and condemn US war-making. In November 1965, the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF, or Viet Cong) released two army enlisted men, one white and one Black, to coincide with the March on Washington for Peace in Vietnam after each made antiwar statements. Over sixty Americans were released in this way over the course of the war, mostly from the South but including twelve from Hanoi, usually after the parolees denounced the war. Acts of mercy demonstrated the peaceful intent of communist leaders more effectively than

20 Howes, *Voices*, 41–6 and Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 188–94 discuss the war-crimes issue with material quoted here taken from Howes, *Voices*, 42 and 57.
21 Hồ quoted in Allen, *Last Man*, 20. The shift to less punitive treatment as the war went on is well established – see Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 226 – but most POWs maintain that their abuse continued until 1969, with more severe treatment reserved for the most insubordinate inmates and for their senior command.
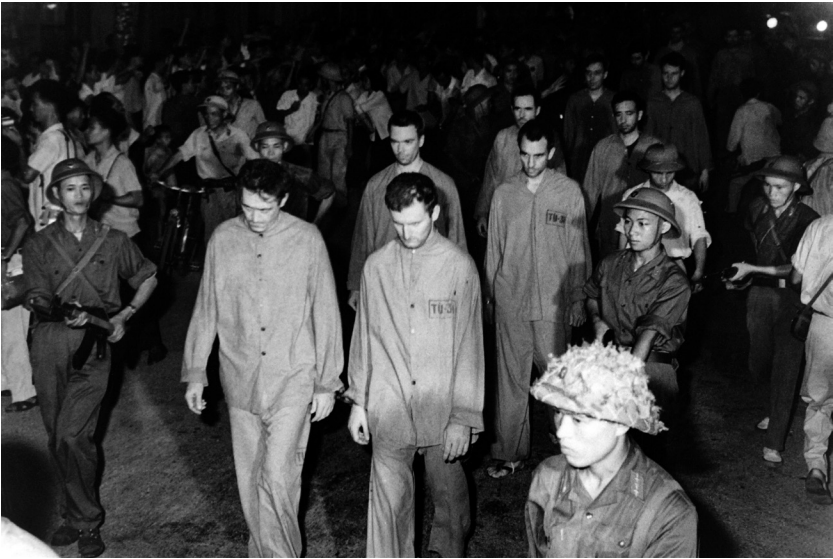
Figure 19.1 American airmen, captured by North Vietnamese forces, are paraded through the streets of Hanoi (July 6, 1966).
Source: – / Contributor / AFP / Getty Images.

violence against American captives. Given that most early releases involved enlisted men captured in South Vietnam, often released into the custody of peace activists, they also placed the Vietnamese Revolution in solidarity with peace and freedom movements elsewhere, including "the just struggle of the US Negroes … for basic national rights," as the NLF proclaimed upon releasing two Black soldiers in 1967, while relieving beleaguered Southern fighters of responsibility for keeping prisoners fed, concealed, and alive.[22]

The Fight for Moral Authority

The release of American POWs signaled to the world that these men could return home if only the US government ended the war, a message that Vietnamese authorities and American peace activists reinforced by cooperating on prisoner paroles. Because POWs were high-profile to begin with – and made more so by communist propaganda – and because they were the only Americans in Vietnam unable to be called home by the US government, they proved valuable bargaining chips in communist diplomacy, and became more

22 Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 173–6, 186; Allen, *Last Man*, 16–24, 310, fn. 6.

so as the war dragged on. Each year the war continued meant more Americans in Vietnamese prisons while adding another year to the captivity of those already there, lending urgency to calls to end the war in the United States. As Americans gave up on other rationales for waging war, the well-being of American POWs became "the only remaining war aim of any respectability." Nixon tried to turn this to his advantage, telling Americans that "as long as the North Vietnamese have any Americans there will be Americans in South Vietnam, and enough Americans to give them an incentive to release the prisoners." But administration officials knew that by making the POWs the primary rationale for the war's continuation they made it likely that "Hanoi may use prisoners explicitly to try to squeeze a timetable out of us," as one predicted. In 1971, North Vietnam's lead negotiator Lê Đức Thọ did just that, telling the *New York Times* that "all American prisoners may promptly return to their homes" with the "withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam."[23]

Implicit in such offers was the obverse: most POWs would not return until US withdrawal. By releasing low-ranking cooperative POWs while detaining more numerous high-ranking obdurate ones, communists appealed to war-weary Americans while pressing US policymakers to end the war. "We will not settle the war just for prisoners," snapped National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in his secret talks with Hanoi. But administration officials could not say that publicly when the POWs were more important to American voters than the survival of the Saigon government. So, Nixon obfuscated by conflating American MIAs – men the Pentagon had little reason to believe were alive – with the much smaller number of confirmed POWs, then making unprecedented and impossible demands that Hanoi must "account for" all of them before the war would end. Such sleight of hand originated the irresolvable "POW/MIA issue" that persists to this day, authorizing further assaults on Vietnam that continued long after the war's official end.[24] But it satisfied few Americans at the time, and fewer with each passing year. "The obvious solution to the POW problem is to end the war," countered one antiwar group. In the last two years of the war this position was echoed by POW/MIA Families for Immediate Release and by antiwar politicians like Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern.[25]

23 Allen, *Last Man*, 47–50.
24 Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Amherst, MA, 2007).
25 Allen, *Last Man*, 22–3, 50–6.

435

The goal of Vietnamese POW propaganda and diplomacy was to win friends and demoralize foes in Vietnam, the United States, and the world. Over the course of the war communists learned that they could better pursue this goal through suasion than coercion. But neither course was easy, because most American POWs, especially the officer–aviators in Hanoi, were determined to thwart Vietnamese designs, and they were not passive pawns despite their captive status. POW agency can be hard to spot within the context of Hanoi's prisons, particularly when it involved provoking and publicizing the very abuse Vietnamese jailers were eager to dish out. Yet American resistance to Vietnamese authority did as much to shape the POW experience as Vietnamese intent, as evidenced by the fact that Americans who cooperated with their captors were treated humanely. Most POWs, however, chose a different path when Hanoi asked captives "to decide whether they were going to repent their crimes and join with the Vietnamese people in seeking a just end to Washington's illegal and immoral war, or to continue on their belligerent ways." Faced with this choice, "we forced them to be brutal to us," Denton, the navy's second-highest ranking officer in Hanoi, later said. "And this policy was successful," he continued, "in that the consequent exposure to their brutality ultimately caused United States public and official pressure to bear so heavily on our captors." In pursuing this course, POWs saw themselves not as helpless victims of Vietnamese power but as indomitable combatants in what they called "the battle for Hanoi," a fight for moral authority before the world where "the only weapons we had were our bodies and our pain." "Everybody says we had nothing to do," remarked one returned POW. "But we did have something to do," namely "to resist the North Vietnamese attempts to exploit us." In this fight "the V's got nothing," said another. "They tortured people but they got nothing. I kept faith in what I believed in – my God, my country, and my family." "I want you all to remember we walked out of Hanoi as winners."[26]

Such a dynamic may have emerged in any Cold War prison, given that conflict's ideological dimensions. Prisoner indoctrination and abuse also featured in Saigon's prisons, in communist and noncommunist prisons during the Korean War, and in "reeducation camps" throughout the world. But the ubiquity of such practices in carceral settings returns us to the question of why the POW experience in Vietnam captured the American imagination. The answer derives in part from the determination of American POWs in Hanoi to distinguish themselves from their Korean War predecessors, who

26 Allen, *Last Man*, 77; Howes, *Voices*, 50, 70, 94.

were deemed insufficiently resistant to communist "brainwashing." To guard against a repeat performance of prisoner collaboration, the Pentagon issued a report in 1955 titled "POW: The Fight Continues after the Battle" that included a strict new code of conduct that ordered POWs to "make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country," to "accept neither parole or special favors from the enemy," and to "resist by all means available … to the utmost of my ability." These dictates were drilled into US pilots at air force and navy survival schools, which were also beefed up after Korea, leaving aviators primed to resist communist indoctrination.[27] With limited means to demonstrate their resistance to audiences outside Vietnamese prisons, especially with their captors determined to publicize their guilt and contrition before the world, POWs made their resistance as dramatic as possible, engaging in theatrical displays such as that Denton staged when he blinked out "TORTURE" on television. Watching as POWs "came back on our feet, rather than our knees," as one put it, Nixon likened it to "a great play or a great movie – you had a helluva bunch of stars on this one – it's an all-star cast."[28]

Nixon's remarks remind us that the communists weren't the only actors in Hanoi. American POWs acted too. In some sense, their performance in Hanoi's prisons was but one act in the broader theatrical production of the Cold War, a war in which signs, signals, appearances, and perceptions mattered more than material realities on any given battlefield. As officers who began their careers during the Red Scare, American POWs had spent years learning their lines via loyalty oaths, security clearances, and codes of conduct. As they prepared for leading roles, they envisioned their parts in the lofty terms Kennedy laid out in his inaugural address, which framed the Cold War less in terms of armed conflict than as a social–political contest for hearts and minds. "Let every nation know …" Kennedy proclaimed, before launching into a long recital of the material and moral goods the United States claimed to represent on the world stage.[29] Their senior officers, Navy Commanders James

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27 Department of Defense, "POW: The Fight Continues after the Battle," July 29, 1955: www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/POW-report.pdf; Howes, *Voices*, 117–20, 248. Most prisoners, including senior commanders in Hanoi, saw the code of conduct as a set of principles more than a binding set of commands, in part because, if followed to the letter, the code risked death, in part because its "to the utmost of my ability" clause allowed exceptions under duress, which the prisoners constantly faced.

28 Allen, *Last Man*, 67–8.

29 Jonathan Schell, *Time of Illusion* (New York, 1976), chapter 6 emphasizes how central appearances were in the Vietnam War and Cold War. This was true not only for Nixon, Schell's subject, but for all parties to the conflict. John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1961: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-2.

Stockdale and Jeremiah Denton, mastered theories of flexible response and the credibility of power while earning master's degrees in international relations during Kennedy's presidency – Stockdale at Stanford, Denton at George Washington – just prior to shipping off to Vietnam, where the growing US mission was presented as an effort to show American resolve to a watching world. Given such training, it is hardly surprising that Stockdale concluded soon after his August 1965 capture that "the American POW did not suddenly find himself on the war's sidelines. Rather, he found himself on one of the major battlefronts – the propaganda battlefront." Like his captors, Stockdale knew the importance of public opinion to the Cold War's contest of arms. As commanders on the propaganda front, Stockdale, Denton, and Risner, the senior air force man and *Time* cover star, fought to win. They developed means of communication, including but not limited to a tap code for nonverbal transmission, established a chain of command, and ordered their men "to take torture, forcing the Vietnamese to impose significant pain" before acceding to their demands. They knew that they could not resist all cooperation. But their orders required that Americans "should resist until they broke us and, when we recovered, make them break us again," as Denton explained, to demonstrate to their captors, themselves, and the world that their cooperation was coerced and insincere, and that communists were aggressors and liars. To that end they insisted that no American should participate in Hanoi's "fink release program," which required and rewarded displays of deference to Vietnamese authority, and they threatened to bring court-martial charges against those who did upon their return home.[30]

Not all prisoners lived by these rules. Twelve Hanoi men were granted early release. And late-arriving "new guys" shot down after the bombing of North Vietnam resumed in 1972 saw the old guard as rigid, even fanatical, as did some Southern POWs moved North for safekeeping in the war's last years. Still, that just twelve Northern POWs took early release – including Hanoi's lone enlisted man, who was given permission by his officers in order to smuggle intelligence out of the camps – suggests the determined resistance of most others. Disciplined, competitive, resourceful, and proud, with abiding commitments to US nationalist culture, which for many included a devout Christianity and strong sense of global mission, the Hanoi prisoners were well-suited for waging ideological war. Many, including Stockdale and

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30 Jim and Sybil Stockdale, *In Love and War: The Story of a Family's Ordeal and Sacrifice during the Vietnam Years* (New York, 1984); Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chapter 7, with Stockdale quote from 129. Howes, *Voices*, chapter 3 offers an insightful analysis of these issues with quoted material from pages 23, 30, 66–7, 96.

Denton, attended military service academies before making a career in the armed forces, leaving them jealous of their reputations within peer groups that extended across the US armed forces. And some, like John Sydney McCain III, came from families with long records of military service, and thus felt obliged to live up to the reputations and expectations of their fathers and grandfathers. McCain's father, John Sydney McCain, Jr., and grandfather, John Sydney McCain, Sr., were both admirals, and his father became commander-in-chief, Pacific soon after son's capture. When McCain, whom the communists called "the Crown Prince," confessed to being "a black criminal" and "an air pirate" after four days of torture, he felt "faithless" and "ashamed," certain that his statement would "embarrass my father." "Nothing could save me," he later wrote, except "acts of defiance," which "felt so good" that "they more than compensated for their repercussions," helping him to "keep at bay the unsettling feelings of guilt and self-doubt."[31]

Accounts like McCain's help to explain what motivated Americans "to take torture," as opposed to what motivated Vietnamese to give it. Since no prisoner could refuse all cooperation with their captors and survive, they needed some way to prove that their compliance was coerced rather than freely given. Signs of abuse that were visible on the body – stigmata – provided proof of psychological mortification and expiation, something American POWs so desperately needed that many – Stockdale, Denton, Risner, and McCain among them – resorted to self-harm, even attempted suicide, to prove that they had adhered to their own unbending code.

"Strength in unity," as Stockdale conceived it, was critical to both POW suffering and their survival. Sociologists have long recognized "small-group cohesion" as key to military discipline and mission effectiveness, and "unity over self" was a watchword among American POWs, giving them a sense of being accountable to one another in opposition to a foreign foe. Given their shared race, gender, class, age, occupation, and political and religious convictions, such allegiances came easily. Their bond with one another was, in some sense, an extension, or distillation, of their connection with the nation and its leading men and institutions. The POWs, like their captors, saw themselves as the nation's "precious sons," and it was that shared understanding that motivated them to resist efforts to convert them and instead cling to what McCain called the "faith of my fathers." Uniform men in uniform, the prisoners' reinforcing identities made it difficult to condemn their nation or

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31 Allen, *Last Man*, 78; John McCain with Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers: A Family Memoir* (New York, 1999), chapters 18–20, with quotations from 243–6.

its outsized presence in the world without dishonoring, even destroying, themselves. "The communists spent upwards of four, five, six, seven, eight, nine years trying to turn us against our country, against our way of life, against America," said one upon his return; "the natural reaction on the part of ninety-nine percent of us was to build our patriotism even stronger." This was their "natural" reaction, because the Hanoi men so neatly embodied the nation that went to war in Vietnam, preserving its patriotic values and patriarchal, racial, and religious order through nine long years of pain and anguish, no matter what happened outside their prison cells.[32]

Conclusion

The POWs' refusal to bow to Vietnamese demands or to concede the legitimacy of critical perspectives on the war and the nation that authorized it – their refusal even to admit the basic but profound fact of US defeat – made them central to American memory of the war. Their undeniable suffering at the hands of their captors, combined with their "we-win-even-when-we-lose" obstinacy, multiplied by their instinct for self-promotion – during their last years in captivity the POWs went so far as to form toastmaster clubs where they practiced patriotic speeches and fielded mock questions from reporters – worked to legitimize the American cause in Vietnam, resurrect a sense of national pride, and restore public trust in the use of force.

These ends were achieved in part through politics, including Denton's election to the Senate in 1980 and McCain's election to the House in 1982, then the Senate in 1986. Both conservative Republicans took themes from the POW experience to promote military rearmament and national reunion under white male leadership. Even more, the ends were accomplished through culture and memory, which worked to turn the Vietnam War from an angry wound to a noble cause. In POW memoirs and films, the war's moral and strategic failures were inverted even as they were displaced. Unlike the wider war, where Americans possessed a preponderance of power but found that their excessive use of force backfired, breeding resistance and sympathy for those who resisted, in Hanoi's prisons Americans cast themselves as innocent victims of communist aggression, a more familiar and appealing war story. American POWs flipped the script on their critics. Indeed, one surreal feature of their strategy was how it resembled but reversed the thinking

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32 McCain, *Faith*, 254–7; Allen, *Last Man*, 78–9. Stockdale discusses strength in unity in *Love and War*, chapter 9.

and tactics of the New Left. Like Mario Savio's calls to Berkeley students to "put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus – and you've to make it stop," POW resolve "to lie on the railroad tracks hoping that the sheer bulk of our bodies would slow down the train" used civil disobedience to disrupt illegitimate authority with the assurance that "the whole world was watching." But whereas the peace and freedom movements of the 1960s used civil disobedience to dramatize the unjust nature of Cold War America, POWs used their experience to reinscribe American power with moral force.[33]

This project sparked ample resistance, particularly in the beginning when anger over the war and its injustices was most acute. "In what ways are these relatively few P.O.W.'s greater heroes than the 50,000 dead boys who came home in body bags?" asked one *New York Times* columnist. One veteran wrote to *Time* to voice his "resentment about the solicitous attention the returning P.O.W.'s are receiving" compared with the lack of interest that greeted "draftees who faced the war 24 hours a day on the ground." Charles Evers, the brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, cabled Nixon to ask, "What happened to the foot soldiers, the marines and especially the black and Mexican-American GIs?" Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel raised similar concerns, noting that he was "disturbed by the absence of black faces in the happy scenes of welcome portrayed on the television sets." And Ngô Vĩnh Long, director of the Vietnam Resource Center, complained that the effusive welcome given to returned POWs "served to cover up and justify the inhumane policies of the United States against the Indochinese people." "They are trying to pose as heroic victims when they were responsible for killing countless Vietnamese," insisted Jane Fonda, the antiwar activist and actor who called returned POWs "professional killers." It was "disturbing," added Yale psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, that the POWs sought to recreate an image "of simple, old-fashioned American military virtue as though nothing had happened in Vietnam."

But what disturbed some reassured most. And, besides, POW suffering and the fate of their still-missing counterparts, the MIAs, offered ample cause for those who wished to pursue the war's unfinished business to do so. "When you abandon 1,300 men there is no peace with honor," said one MIA activist a few months after the POW homecoming ended. "For us the war goes on."[34] Like the hero–victim dualism of the POWs, which allowed Americans,

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33 Yen Le Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: US Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58 (2) (2006), 329–52; Allen, *Last Man*, 68, 78–81; Howes, *Voices*, 30–2.

34 Allen, *Last Man*, 63–4, 66, 81; Darda, *White Men*, 46.

441

particularly white Americans, to celebrate themselves while condemning the Vietnamese and their American sympathizers, so too the Janus-faced POW/MIA issue allowed Americans simultaneously to embrace the social and political recuperation the prisoners promised while still grieving what was lost in the war and could not be recovered. These impulses existed in tension, but that tension gave the issue its dynamism and longevity. The celebration of POWs worked to repair the loss that MIAs symbolized, while the continued absence of MIAs signaled that no celebration was sufficient, making still more celebration necessary. And new wars more likely.