

POW-MIA coverup exposed despite Senate hearings

by Edward Spannaus

A fierce battle is taking place behind the scenes in the U.S. Senate in connection with efforts to bring to a conclusion the 20-year coverup of the abandonment of prisoners of war (POWs) by the Kissinger-Nixon administration in 1972-73. Although the creation of the Senate Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs, chaired by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), was supposed to air the issue, and then bury it once and for all, the recent hearings appear instead to have brought to the surface longstanding bitterness at Kissinger's betrayal of the POWs, and at the ensuing coverup conducted by five administrations.

The public revival of the POW-MIA issue is also being fueled by a continuous stream of rumors that off-again, on-again presidential candidate Ross Perot is planning a dramatic maneuver in which one or more live POWs would be extracted from Indochina before the November elections.

Bush administration under attack

Two news stories appearing on Oct. 7, which were reportedly based on leaks from the Senate POW-MIA committee, show that the Kerry hearings have not succeeded in putting the POW issue to rest.

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak cited "anger boiling up inside the Senate Select POW-MIA Committee" which is aimed at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The syndicated columnists reported on a secret meeting on Oct. 5 between committee members and Defense Secretary Richard Cheney and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, apparently intended to "tie up loose ends" and head off any further inquiry into the DIA's handling of intelligence reports on POWs who were left behind after the end of the Vietnam War.

Senator Kerry and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who is himself a former POW, are skeptical of reports that there may still be live POWs in Indochina, say Evans and Novak, but committee vice chairman Bob Smith (R-N.H.) believes that POWs are still alive, and this disagreement has flared up in the course of the hearings.

On Oct. 5, Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) took to the floor of the Senate to raise his doubts as to whether Congress could "trust the DIA to competently evaluate evidence of possible survival" of POWs and men listed as missing in action (MIAs). Grassley pointed out that DIA did not follow up reports that POWs had been left behind, and said that the intelligence community all but stopped looking for distress signals

in Indochina. "This was consistent with official policy that all our men are home," charged Grassley.

(For *EIR's* exclusive analysis of how Kissinger betrayed the U.S. POWs and MIAs in the spring of 1973, see *EIR*, Oct. 9, p. 26.)

The existence of a Senate staff memorandum charging that the Bush administration misled the committee about the survival of POWs in Southeast Asia was disclosed in the Oct. 7 *Washington Times*. Recent testimony of Bush administration officials is "misleading at best," and contradicts testimony by former Nixon administration officials which established a strong case that U.S. servicemen were knowingly left behind when U.S. troops withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, argued the staff memorandum.

The *Washington Times* also cited another secret memorandum from Senator Smith to Kerry, saying that Pentagon officials tried to cloud the issue in a recent briefing to committee members. "In my opinion, the briefing was the culmination of years of doubletalk, misinformation, and obfuscation by officials responsible for the POW-MIA issue," wrote Smith, according to the *Washington Times* account.

Kissinger role is well known

Senate Foreign Relations Committee documents reviewed by *EIR* indicate that committee staffers are well aware of the treacherous role played by former Nixon National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger in betraying the POWs and MIAs at the conclusion of Vietnam War.

Internal memoranda prepared by staff members clearly identify Kissinger's responsibility for the Nixon administration's policy statement in April 1973 that all prisoners in Indochina were on their way home—a declaration that at least 350 known prisoners were dead despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Defense Department memoranda cited in last week's issue of *EIR* show that as late as March 28, 1973, Pentagon officials believed that 350 POWs were being held in Laos; nevertheless, by April 12-13, 1973, the U.S. government's official, stated policy was to write off these 350 POWs as dead, and announce that the repatriation of prisoners was complete. By some mysterious process, these 350 known POWs were "converted" to missing in action, thus declaring them unaccounted for—and therefore as good as dead.

Helms staff purged over POW-MIA report

The fight within the Senate Foreign Relations Committee over the POW coverup and exposure of Kissinger's role is a long-standing one, which has resulted in some dramatic eruptions within the committee staff.

Numerous sources have confirmed to *EIR* a story which has been circulating for over a year: that following the May 1991 publication of an explosive minority staff report on the POW issue, nine staff members who had prepared the report were summarily fired. The firings were ordered by Adm. James "Bud" Nance, a former National Security Council staff member who took over Sen. Jesse Helm's (R-N.C.) staff last year.

The controversial report was entitled "An Examination of U.S. Policy Toward POW/MIAs," and was prepared by the Republican staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The report became the equivalent of a commercial "best-seller," with well over 100,000 copies distributed. Its publication triggered the creation of the Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs.

The staff report opened with a letter of transmittal signed by Senator Helms, which states that his staff has concluded, after examining the conduct of those U.S. government agencies which have the responsibility for determining whether any POW-MIAs are still alive, that "the real, internal policy of the U.S. government was to act upon the presumption that all MIAs were dead." As a result, the staff found, "any evidence that suggested an MIA might be alive was uniformly and arbitrarily rejected."

The minority staff report covered the entire history of the POW issue vis-à-vis the Soviet Union from World War I through what it termed "the Second Indochina War" (Vietnam)—the first being fought by communist forces against the French, and with which there were many parallels as regards the treatment of POWs.

The report suggests that the U.S. government "knowingly left men—perhaps thousands of men—in the captivity of communist forces in Southeast Asia." Although the Paris peace agreement signed in January 1973 provided that all POWs were to be returned, the North Vietnamese and their Laotian allies took the position that the peace accord did not cover prisoners held by the communist Pathet Lao forces in Laos.

Kissinger had announced at the time of the signing of the Paris agreements that all American prisoners held in Laos "will be returned to us in Hanoi." Whether Kissinger actually believed this or not is not known, but it is clear that this was never done, and Kissinger, in his rush to accomplish the withdrawal of U.S. troops, never held the North Vietnamese to this alleged agreement.

The minority staff report includes a section entitled "The Kissinger Hand-carried Letter" dealing with Kissinger's secret agreement to provide postwar reconstruction aid to North Vietnam. The Kissinger letter, from President Nixon, detailed the administration's alleged commitment to contribute

over \$4 billion in aid for reconstruction. It also called for the creation of a U.S.-North Vietnam Joint Economic Commission to be formed within 30 days.

However, says the staff report: "The letter, and the commitments it implied, were not revealed even to the highest-ranking senators and members of Congress. . . . Congress knew nothing of the Kissinger commitments."

In the interpretation of the minority staff, payment of such funds to North Vietnam "would have been an admission of culpability" for the war. "Congress realized full well, if Kissinger did not, that the soothing word 'reconstruction' actually meant 'reparations.' The American people would never pay reparations when no crime had been committed. Congress saw Kissinger's plan as a betrayal and an admission of guilt."

However, the report continues, "there is no doubt that the North Vietnamese concluded that the President's emissary had pledged billions of dollars in reparations to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam."

The report implies, but does not make explicit, that the North Vietnamese had consistently linked the release of POWs to the payment of the reparations. Thus when Kissinger promised, but failed to deliver the promised payment, he sealed the fate of hundreds, if not thousands, of POWs and MIAs.

How many were left?

The total number of U.S. prisoners returned by North Vietnam during "Operation Homecoming" in March 1973 was 591. The staff report reaches the following conclusions about the total number who were left behind:

"At that time [April 1973] the U.S. government listed 2,538 [as] missing in action. However, sources interviewed by the committee staff stated that this official number did not include MIAs assigned to covert or black operations. They estimated the number of covert MIAs at another 2,500, making a total of over 5,000 MIAs—over twice the official number."

It is highly significant that these estimates and conclusions are coming from the *Republican* staff of the Foreign Relations Committee. While they tend to put a good part of the blame for the initial abandonment on the United States' weak negotiating position due to internal dissension and the desire to end the war, they hit Kissinger's secret negotiations very hard for the initial abandonment, and the Reagan-Bush administrations for the continuing suppression of evidence.

While it seems clear that the Kerry hearings were intended to finally close the door on the POW issue, there is a growing outrage in both the U.S. population and among Senate personnel themselves, which may prevent this from being carried out. Critical elements that Kerry and company may not have taken into account, are the growing isolation of George Bush and his administration, as well as long-simmering hatred of Henry Kissinger by those whom he stabbed in the back during his White House years.