

## Vietnam MIAs: A Cynical Affair

PRESIDENT NIXON says there are still 1,300 Americans missing in action and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, and 1,100 American casualties whose bodies have not been recovered—a “wrenching sacrifice” for their families, he adds. Surely all Americans wish with him and Senator Fulbright, whose Foreign Relations Committee has just held hearings on the MIAs, that Hanoi and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (Vietcong) would facilitate an accounting of the missing in action and would repatriate the remains of the dead. The Communist side pledged to do so in the Vietnam cease-fire agreement, signed a year ago. But it has done nothing. It is cruel of the Communists to deny the families the comfort owed them. As Mr. Fulbright said, “Their agreement to cooperate in this unfinished business would indeed be recognized through the world as a mark of humanity and good faith.”

The further fact is, however, that the MIA situation is like the earlier POW situation. In both, Hanoi has used an issue with a sharp humanitarian edge as a political lever. Washington, rather than pay the demanded political price, has sought to characterize the issue as strictly humanitarian and to put on Hanoi the entire onus for not offering satisfaction on it. As before, it is hard to see which of the two countries is the more cynical.

For instance, North Vietnam and the PRG have linked their performance on MIAs under Article 8 (b) of the cease-fire agreement to Saigon's performance on releasing civilian prisoners under Article 8 (c)—the two are “unrelated,” the Pentagon tells Mr. Fulbright. In the small unit set up to execute Article 8 (b), the Communist side has proposed to build cemeteries for its dead in Saigon-controlled areas—“contentious and extraneous,” says the Pentagon. The Communist side insists that Vietnamese next-of-kin be allowed to visit graves prior to or instead of repatriation of remains—“irrelevant,” in the Pentagon's view. Hanoi and the PRG have used

sessions of the MIA unit to complain about alleged cease-fire violations by Saigon and the United States—“propaganda speeches, boycotts, walkouts and general stalling tactics,” says the Pentagon. On the one occasion when the United States sent a search team into a PRG-claimed area, without getting the requisite PRG permission, guerrillas opened fire on the unarmed search party and killed two men, one American, one South Vietnamese.

If this is business as usual for Vietnam, it is exploitation as usual for the affected families. The administration tells them that “we are really on the same side” and that it is doing all it can to gain Hanoi's compliance with the MIA article. But the administration and the families are not on “the same side”: the administration puts support of Saigon ahead of relief for the families. Nor is it doing all it can to gain Hanoi's compliance: it is doing much less than it could if its primary goal were relief for the families. The families are being encouraged to believe that the answer lies in bringing world opinion to bear on Hanoi and the PRG.

Since world opinion failed to sway Hanoi on the POWs, however, it can hardly make much impact on the much less emotional and politically volatile issue of the MIAs. The American public at large wishes to keep the MIAs out of mind, just as the American government wishes to prevent them from undercutting its basic policy of supporting President Thieu. There is scant reason to expect that Hanoi and the Vietcong will break the cease-fire agreements into separate parts, accommodating Washington in a part of special American interest but waiving Washington's cooperation in parts of its own special interest. It is cynical, not to say cruel, to conceal this underlying reality from the families of the MIAs, as Mr. Nixon did in his State of the Union address by saying, “We will press for full compliance with the peace accords . . . particularly a provision that promised the fullest possible accounting for those Americans who are missing in action.”