



The MIA Sellout

by John Corry

The POW-MIA story is changing. Once it was about missing servicemen, but now it is about finance. A *New York Times* story about American business leaders meeting with a high Vietnamese official—"They gave him several standing ovations"—also notes that veterans groups picketed the hotel where the meeting was held. Meanwhile, a *Washington Post* editorial declares that "American businessmen have now joined the many citizens" who want to end the Vietnamese trade embargo. Only the fear of offending MIA families, the *Post* says, keeps the embargo in place. *Time* magazine, examining the charge that Ron Brown asked for \$700,000 to help lift the embargo, ties in the "extremist fringes of the POW-MIA movement," as well as an "archconservative" veterans coalition, and a "far-right newsletter affiliated with Lyndon LaRouche." So determined are lunatic veterans to prevent a rapprochement with Vietnam, it seems, they will even spread lies about Ron Brown.

Well, perhaps, but that still may be irrelevant. The press is not comfortable with the MIA story, and reporters have always held it at arm's length. There are exceptions—Sydney Schanberg, a 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winner for his coverage of the fall of Cambodia, for example—but mostly the MIA story leaves the press cold. A generation of journalists who despised the Vietnam war has now risen to senior management, while their younger colleagues see the war as arid, dead history. Nonetheless, while reasonable people may disagree on

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whether the Vietnamese still hold live Americans, it has become increasingly hard to deny that Americans were left behind when the United States withdrew from Vietnam. Our great news organizations, though, show little interest in this. As Schanberg wrote in his column in *Newsday*: "By and large, the press—certainly the Washington press corps—continues to accept the ridiculous official line, purveyed in Hanoi as well as Washington, that there is no evidence of unreturned prisoners."

Yet the evidence is substantial, and indeed it continues to grow. Last April, Stephen J. Morris, a Harvard researcher, disclosed that he had found a Russian translation of a 1972 Vietnamese report in the archives of the old Soviet Central Committee in Moscow. It said that North Vietnam held 1,205 American prisoners in 1972, 700 more than it released the next year after the signing of the Paris peace accord. Morris's disclosure was page-one news, but it also aroused press skepticism. Despite his scholarly credentials, Morris was a well-known anti-Communist. Most

stories about his find identified him that way. It seemed to be a warning.

A *New York Times* story was typical. It noted that Morris was "under criticism as a partisan who ardently opposes normalizing relations with Vietnam." Then it quoted H. Bruce Franklin, who denounced the Morris document as a "clumsy fabrication." The *Times* identified Franklin as "a professor of English and American studies at Rutgers University, who has written a book in which he asserts that the Vietnamese do not still hold American prisoners of war."

Franklin's identification, however, left out a great deal. While teaching at Stanford in 1971, Franklin helped found the Venceremos brigade. Later he wrote an admiring introduction to a collection of Stalin's writings. Franklin's paper trail has been considerable. In his 1975 autobiography, he proudly quoted a speech he once gave at a Vietnamese-American Independence Day celebration in Paris: "What I propose is that we declare the government of the United States of America in 1967 to be the enemy of mankind, the number-one criminal of the world, wanted dead or alive. . . . Our mutual enemy is not in Hanoi, he is in Washington."

As an unbiased source Franklin was suspect, although he also turned up on CNN and elsewhere to denounce the Morris document. The most sweeping, and apparently scholarly, denunciation of the document, however, appeared in the *New Yorker*. Neil Sheehan, who won a Pulitzer Prize as a UPI reporter in Vietnam, and later passed on Daniel Ellsberg's stolen copy of the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*, called the release of the Morris document "bizarre." Then, in a stunning display of illogic, he attacked Richard Nixon:



The POW-MIA myth had its origin during the war, as a political gambit by Richard Nixon. To buy time and divert attention from the fact that instead of ending the war he was trying to win it through the strategy of Vietnamization . . . Nixon launched a campaign to focus public hatred on the Vietnamese for holding American prisoners. For a time, the gambit worked brilliantly. Some of the public seemed to be under the impression that the President was prosecuting the war solely to free the POWs, rather than adding to their numbers, lengthening their detention and getting 21,000 additional Americans killed by prolonging the conflict.

Sheehan's accusation was astonishing as well as nasty. It ignored any evidence that prisoners were left behind, other than, perhaps, "a few downed airmen in Laos." Sheehan was frozen in time, like so many other old Vietnamese reporters. They made their minds up long ago, and invested their intellectual capital in a particular point of view. They may believe in an Irangate conspiracy, say, or the so-called October Surprise, but they are unwilling to acknowledge Communist duplicity. They still find it easier to slander Nixon than to denounce Ho Chi Minh. It was wholly in character for the North Vietnamese to keep prisoners behind, and then lie about it. The only odd thing is how difficult it is for prominent journalists to admit it.

The Vietminh, the North Vietnamese's predecessors, held back thousands of prisoners after the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the French withdrawal from Indochina. Most of the prisoners were South Vietnamese, but at least some were French. Eventually, they were quietly ransomed back by the French government. Moreover, it has been known for some time that American POWs from the Korean War were secretly sent to the Soviet Union. Indeed, the Associated Press reported in September on a confidential government study that said: "The Soviets transferred several hundred U.S. Korean War POWs to the USSR and did not repatriate them. This transfer was mainly politically motivated, with the intent of holding them as political hostages, subjects for intelligence exploitation and skilled labor within the camp system."

According to the AP, most of the POWs were Air Force fliers. Coincidentally, a few weeks before the AP story appeared, the Pentagon released the translation of an account of a Vietnamese Communist party meeting held in either late 1970 or early 1971. It quoted a Communist official as saying that Vietnam held 735 "American aviator POWs," although it had admitted to holding only 368. American airmen, apparently, were prized in the Communist bloc for their technical knowledge.

This second document did not attract nearly as much press attention as the one Morris found, even though it corroborated the implications that the Vietnamese held back American prisoners. Moreover, on a recent documentary on the Discovery cable channel, Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general, said it was "obvious that Americans were kept in Vietnam after the war was over." He declared this to be an "absolute fact—undeniable."

There is also the report of the Senate Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs that was released early this year. It was covered at length by the press, but not always to good effect. Buried in its 1,223 pages are unnoticed bits and pieces. A single paragraph on page 426, for example, says that Jan Sejna, once a major general in the Czech army, "testified in a deposition and stated in interviews that American POWs were transported to the Soviet Union, transiting Prague." Sejna, who now works for the Defense Intelligence Agency, said he knew of as many as ninety POWs who were passed on this way from Southeast Asia to Moscow. It should be pointed out now that Sejna defected from Czechoslovakia in 1968, when the Vietnam war still had years to go. Any number of POWs might have passed through Prague later.

Meanwhile, Senator Robert J. Smith, the vice chairman of the Senate committee, says he is sure some of the POWs are still alive. Senator John McCain, a POW himself for five terrible years, says he thinks they are all dead. In a way, the matter is academic. No one in Washington or in Hanoi is being held accountable for the abandoned men. The Clinton administration appears to be moving toward lifting the embargo, and the press, for the most part, agrees with Sheehan, who ended his piece in the *New Yorker* by saying the United States must "break free of the last fantasy of the

war"—that POWs were left behind in Southeast Asia.

Certainly the coverage has changed. You may read stories with Hanoi datelines now that never mention past unpleasantness. A recent page-one story in the *Times*, for example, said that in hustling, bustling Hanoi the only victims of the trade embargo were American businessmen. Another *Times* story asserted that growing prosperity even threatened Hanoi's colonial-era charm.

It seems likely that the Vietnamese are onto a good thing, and they know it. In peace as in war, when an opportunity arises they take it. One week after John Kerry, the chairman of the Senate committee on the POWs, visited Hanoi last December, Vietnam awarded Colliers International of Boston an exclusive world-wide contract to broker its commercial real estate deals. Colliers's CEO, Stuart Forbes, is Kerry's cousin. There is no evidence the senator was influenced by this in any way, although almost certainly the Vietnamese government thought he might be. It is another Vietnam story the press has missed. □

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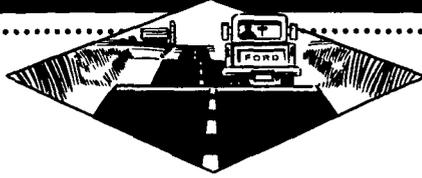
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Sharia Feminists

by Daniel Wattenberg

Mim Udovitch, the feminist columnist at the *Village Voice*, told me a story about a young writer who approached her to pitch a story after the first news accounts that Lorena Bobbitt of Manassas, Virginia, who would later claim abuse, had lopped off her sleeping husband's penis. "She said she wanted to write about the case, and I said, 'Okay, that's good, that's very ambitious, that'll be difficult to do, what do you want to do?' And she said, 'Well, I'm really interested in how everybody is acting like he's the victim.' I said, 'You've got it wrong. He is the victim!'"

Early on, the incident provoked among some women a fair amount of sharply edged humor, the theme of which was invariably, "Now do you get it?" Fair enough. Unless you've agitated against the misogynistic shtick of Sam Kinison and Andrew Dice Clay or the current crop of tasteless Hillary Clinton jokes, you probably don't have standing to gripe about such Bobbitt jokes. But at some point, around the time we learned the names of the unhappy Manassas couple, the table-turning black humor became feminist dogma. And that's another story. Because, as Udovitch puts it, "It confuses something you might want to support metaphorically with something you would not support in actuality."

Feminist leaders have now rallied to Lorena Bobbitt as a martyr and an avenging angel for America's battered women. *Ms.* published an account of the incident in its September-October issue that does not mention that John Bobbitt denies his wife's charge that he raped her. The Virginia chapter of the National Organization for Women has set up a Lorena Bobbitt support line. If you wish to express support for her, you can call

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Virginia NOW Coordinator Denise Lee.

In a *Vanity Fair* account, Kim Masters tells of "the Lorena supporters who have transformed the V-for-Victory sign into a symbol of solidarity by making scissorlike motions with their fingers." (Shades of the Weather Underground's index-and-pinkie "fork salute" in solidarity with the Manson Family's stabbing to death—with a fork—of the pregnant Sharon Tate.) Masters also reports that Christine Sehn, wife of the surgeon who hooked John Bobbitt's penis back on, has been hounded by women angry that he did so. Sehn told Masters: "I've heard women say, 'I wish she'd put it down the garbage disposal.'"

Pronouncing the mutilation "a critical event in the history of women," Judith Olton Mueller, executive vice president of the Women's Center, a non-profit counseling center in Vienna, Virginia, told the AP, "Violence is done to women continuously and pervasively. And this is a retaliatory act of great dramatic value, where a woman has returned, retaliated in a way that is equally as violent and dramatic as the violence done unto her."

While Olton Mueller reportedly did not condone the act, her thinking illustrates one widely noted feature of the thinking of those who have condoned it: a presumption of John Bobbitt's guilt. It is assumed that he routinely beat his wife over a period of years. It is assumed that he raped her the night she castrated him. It is assumed, at the very least, that he was an irredeemable philandering pig.

Maybe the assumptions are right, maybe not. But the two trials in the Bobbitt case will not be a reprise of Clarence Thomas vs. Anita Hill. Here, the he-said-she-said accounts will be sifted and probed in real adversarial criminal proceedings. Witnesses will be deposed and cross-examined under oath

by professional litigators, not by inept politicians fearful of "backlash" or by axe-grinding Senate staffers. Tendentious media accounts will be exposed and mooted in the course of the Bobbitt trials. There may be surprises.

In an ABC "20/20" segment on the case, correspondent Tom Jariel quoted a resident of the Bobbitts' apartment complex to buttress his portrayal of John Bobbitt as a sexually vain and predatory action hero manqué:

JARIEL [voice-over]: John spent a lot of time keeping physically fit in the body-building room next to the pool where he was also frequently seen. He signed in with a pseudonym—Jean-Claude Van Damme, an action film star. An airline employee and resident of Maplewood, Mike Dibley, complained about John flirting with his girlfriend right in front of him. MIKE DIBLEY, Maplewood resident: I said to my girlfriend, "That's one person I didn't want in this home, I don't want to be around," just from the three months that I'd known him, his actions—too strange. It was kind of the icing on the cake when someone's hitting on your girlfriend in front of you.

But Gregory Murphy, John Bobbitt's lawyer, recently deposed Mike Dibley. "[Dibley] said they took it totally out of context," says Murphy. Murphy paraphrases what Dibley told him under oath: "First off, I *did* say he was hitting on her, but I prefaced it. They asked me a question about 'Well, what's John like—is he out here flirting around and stuff?' And I said, 'Hey, John's a very nice guy, we've been friends, we get along great. . . . Yeah, there was a time, it was a very minor incident, but [John] was sitting around the pool talking to me and my girlfriend. And I walked to the bathroom or clubhouse, came back out, and I could see him sort of flexing his muscles. And what went through my mind