

Kissinger under fire on POW scandal; the end of an era?

by Edward Spannaus

Henry A. Kissinger was in a very uncomfortable position on Sept. 22, one he usually avoids: having to testify under oath. The issue was the fate of prisoners of war and missing in action (POW-MIAs) from the Vietnam era. For the first time, Kissinger has come under sustained public attack, much of it from cabinet-level officials from his own administration—known as the Nixon-Ford administrations. Former CIA head James R. Schlesinger and former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird were among those who testified that it was probable that the United States had knowingly left POWs behind in Southeast Asia in 1973.

Among the disclosures coming out around hearings before the Senate Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs, chaired by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), are:

- A memorandum written by Richard Secord and signed by Lawrence Eagleburger which said that the release of 10 POWs captured inside Laos would be sufficient for the United States to carry out a troop withdrawal, even though 350 men were listing as missing in Laos;

- The 350 POWs were arbitrarily declared dead so as not to complicate the withdrawal of U.S. troops;

- Former Secretary of Defense Laird testified that he was urged not to discuss the POW issue. Among those urging him not to go public was Averill Harriman;

- Former Secretary of Defense and former CIA head Schlesinger testified that he has “a high-probability assessment that people were left behind in Laos.” Schlesinger also testified that he and other high administration officials were kept in the dark about Kissinger’s secret negotiations with the Vietnamese.

A conspiracy through five administrations

At various points, Kissinger let loose tirades against the hearings and the news media. For example: “I am amazed to see press stories hinting darkly about prisoners abandoned

by their own government. There has been talk of conspiracy extending through five administrations. Leaks assert that when President Nixon announced that all prisoners were on their way home, he or his aides knew that many were left behind. That allegation is a flat-out lie.”

Kissinger put his finger on it. For what is at issue is bringing to an end that “conspiracy extending through five administrations,” which can be otherwise identified as the “Kissingerian era” of U.S. foreign policy.

Appropriate parallels can be drawn to the John F. Kennedy assassination. In both cases there are *two* principal conspiracies: the original conspiracy around the event (the assassination, or the abandonment of the POWs), and the coverup. In both instances, the subsequent coverup involves a much broader circle of officials than those involved in the original events.

What is being covered up here, is the early 1970s secret war in Southeast Asia, which was centered in Laos and Cambodia. The United States could not acknowledge the existence of POWs in Laos, because it never admitted to having troops there. The Sept. 23 *New York Times* broached the issue, when it noted that in 1973, there were 1,100 U.S. servicemen listed as “KIA-BNR” (“killed in action, body not recovered”). Says the *Times*: “All people lost in covert operations were apparently on those lists, including 150-200 whose places of death were falsified to hide their presence in Cambodia or Laos, where Americans were not supposed to be.”

Theodore Shackley, CIA station chief in Laos from 1967-71, who was a key operative in Operation Phoenix in Vietnam from 1973-75, and later CIA deputy director of operations, ran the secret war in Laos. This was based upon the secret training of indigenous Meo tribesman to fight the communist Pathet Lao.

According to many sources, this operation, like many others, was financed by drug money. Specifically, the covert operations in Laos were financed through the proceeds of

opium production and trade run by Laotian warlord Vang Pao. Indeed, the secret war in Laos did not end with the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. U.S. involvement in the "Golden Triangle" drug trade continued.

What has emerged from the public Senate hearings is the idea that the Nixon administration and its successors perpetuated the POW coverup because they were locked into Nixon's statements in the Spring of 1973 that there were no more POWs in Vietnam. Attention has been focused on the role of Nixon and Kissinger in arbitrarily declaring all POWs dead, so as not to have the POW issue complicate the withdrawal of U.S. troops over 1973-75. However, many accounts of the POW coverup suggest that the hysteria with which one administration after another greeted revelations about sightings of POWs in Vietnam and Laos, was closely related to these drug-financed covert operations which were to be kept secret from the American public.

In fact, it has been shown in various sources, such as the 1990 book *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, that not only were U.S. POWs abandoned in Southeast Asia, but the Pentagon and intelligence agencies went to extraordinary lengths to perpetuate the coverup. Various sources report threats and frame-ups to discredit those who protested the coverup, and even the deployment of teams into Southeast Asia to assassinate American POWs who knew too much.

Kissinger's betrayal of the U.S.

The deeper implications of the POW-MIA coverup are twofold. There is the Kissingerian geopolitical, balance-of-power foreign policy, tied to a belief in British superiority and Soviet ascendancy. And there is the "secret government" apparatus, partially exposed in the Iran-Contra affair, which is an outgrowth of the secret wars of the Kissinger era. Both must be brought to an end. Kissinger's "Metternichian" view of foreign policy has been widely discussed: his belief in the so-called balance of power, playing one power off against another, never allowing one country to dominate. What is less well known is how this resulted in a sellout of U.S. interests.

Elmo Zumwalt, the former chief of naval operations who resigned from the Nixon administration in protest of Kissinger's duplicity, described Kissinger's world view as based on the belief "that the dynamics of history are on the side of the Soviet Union." Believing that the Soviet Union would soon be the only superpower, and the United States would be an also-ran, Kissinger wished to "make the best possible deal with the Soviet Union while there is still time to make any deal."

The other side of Kissinger's policy was his slavish adoration of the British. As he admitted in his May 1982 speech at London's Chatham House, Kissinger carried out the dictates of the British Foreign Office while in the U.S. White House. On Sept. 19, Kissinger repeated this in a speech to the World Congress on Economic Development in Washington. "The British view at the end of the World War II was that their empire was over, and they had to gain as much influence

as possible over U.S. decision-making," said Kissinger. "They were so zealous about this, it became almost embarrassing not to take their advice."

It's not that benign, however. The Kissinger policy was one of carnage and butchery, expressed in assassinations, terrorism, regional wars, and surrogate wars. The destruction of Lebanon is an example of such Kissingerian methods, as was the bloody eight-year Iran-Iraq War, in which the U.S. armed both sides. The stated policy of Kissinger's protégé Lawrence Eagleburger in the Balkans is the same: Let everybody fight and kill each other until they can't fight any more.

Kissinger's protestations in the Senate hearings that his hands were tied by anti-war sentiment in Congress is a bald-faced lie. Kissinger never relied on U.S. military strength in his negotiations. His leverage was his back-channel negotiations with China and the Soviets. He was counting on the promise of concessions to both powers, as well as playing off the two against each other, to isolate North Vietnam. U.S. troops, and those who became POWs, were mere pawns in Kissinger's global game.

Project Democracy and the secret government

The second legacy of the Kissinger era is the growth of the secret government apparatus partially exposed in the Iran-Contra affair. Former CIA head William Casey's private covert operations, bypassing official bureaucracies, were pale imitations of Kissinger's practices in the Nixon and Ford administrations. Kissinger attempted to centralize all foreign diplomacy, intelligence, and covert operations in the National Security Council, bypassing State, Defense, and the CIA.

It is thus no accident that so many figures in the Iran-Contra operation got their start under Kissinger. Secord, Shackley, Thomas Clines, Robert McFarlane, Brent Scowcroft, and others were all part of the original Kissinger secret government apparatus, which drew in elements of the military and intelligence community operating under his direction through the National Security Council.

Oliver North's first major assignment at the NSC was as liaison for the Kissinger Commission on Central America. Out of this grew Project Democracy, the machinery which ran, and survived, Iran-Contra.

Further, Shackley provided the model for the Iran-Contra operations, including the use of funds derived from secret drug deals and arms trafficking to finance covert operations. Shackley knew that this was easier than asking Congress for the money. Shackley's "Third Option" was the use of surrogate warfare as a substitute for superpower conflict, creating and managing regional irregular warfare. He also wanted a special mechanism of government to centralize all counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations; this is what the Oliver North apparatus in the Reagan administration NSC became. This apparatus, not accidentally, was under the official, direct personal supervision of Vice President George Bush.