

Missing Pieces: Versions and Visions of Vietnam POW/MIA in American Culture

by Philip K. Jason

M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America, by H. Bruce Franklin. Expanded and updated edition. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993. Pp. 246. \$9.95 (Paper).

Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW, by Elliott Gruner. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993. Pp. 280. \$37.00 (Hardcover) \$14.95 (Paper).

Voices of the Vietnam POWs; Witnesses to Their Fight, by Craig Howes. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pp. 295. \$39.95 (Hardcover) \$16.95 (Paper).

US, by Wayne Karlin. New York: Henry Holt, 1993. Pp. 240. \$22.50.

Of all Vietnam War narratives, none are more compelling and yet detachable from their historical frame than the POW stories. They seem less attached to the circumstances of the particular conflict than any other materials that grow out of it, and more attached to other narratives of their own kind: narratives of confinement of any and all wars. Isolation, deprivation, punishment, and persecution prevail over descriptions of weapons, strategies, battlefields, and ideologies. And yet these narratives have political dimensions as well, just as the prisoners—even in silence—are configured into political agendas and myths. In a relatively short period of time, four very different books have tried to make sense of the POW experience as well as the more mysterious and elusive matter of the MIA.

Craig Howes' awkwardly subtitled book (how are voices witnesses?. . . why tell us the self-evident truth that those who struggled as POWs witnessed their own struggle?) offers both more and less than it might as a treatise on POW narratives. The

more is an extensive front porch of seventy pages in which Howes provides an examination of the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States." While this discussion of the Code, camp-specific rules, and the body's limits under torture and deprivation provides a valuable institutional and situational context for exploring the narratives, it might well be replaced—at least in part—by material that sets these POW memoirs in a larger context of survivor narratives. Without such a genre context, Howes' analysis remains curiously unanchored, for all of its industry and detail.

The closest thing to a genre context comes from frequent references to Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1800* (1973). Howes finds in Slotkin's discussion of those who survived capture by American Indians a Puritan ethos that generated narratives with biblical shapes and symbologies. Howes finds, too, many of the same paradigms in the writings of the leaders of the POW establishment: the long-time senior officer POWs who were incarcerated in Hanoi. He develops these parallels most fully in a chapter called "The Official Story," which analyzes John G. Hubbell's *P.O.W.: A Definitive History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam, 1964-1973*. Howes ably defends his contention that Hubbell's volume is the "authorized" account that collates into a single text the attitudes of the POW elite. This elite was comprised of the elders of this peculiar nation, resourceful captives whose efforts so undermined the purposes of the prison administrators that they were assigned to "Alcatraz" to cut off their influence on the other prisoners. Parables and saints' lives abound, along with rules (interpretations of the Code) handed down for the betterment of the people.

In the following chapter, "The Big Picture," Howes reveals the ways in which the memoirs of individual POW elders complicate while essentially paying allegiance to the official story as laid down by Hubbell. Without denying the memoirists their individuality, Howes finds something close to a mutual brainwashing in the unified vision that emerges from their various recollections. In this chapter, too, Howes provides cogent

observations about how these narratives handle issues of gender, race, and captivity itself. Howes treats several POW narratives most programmatically cast as inspirational and instructional documents for the American people in a separate chapter (thus establishing a subgenre). However, the aspect of spiritual autobiography or providential history attaches to just about every text that Howe examines.

In "The Story's Other Sides," Howes reviews the stories of those POWs marginalized by the experiences and writings of the Hanoi POW command. Here the reader encounters the maverick (John Dramesi), the enlisted man (Douglas Hegdahl), the "anti-POW" (George Smith), and the various prisoners held in jungle camps beyond the system established by the early shutdown elders at the Hanoi Hilton (Hoa Lo Prison). Throughout, Howes pokes at the myth of the "official story," underscoring the fact that it is only the story of a handful of men of rank and seniority enacted on a single stage, the story of "commissioned aviators captured before the summer of 1968" (77). These "other sides" suggest the limitations of the "official story" as a reliable representation of the full range of Vietnam POW experience and outlook.

Howes saves his detailed discussion of James Bond Stockdale for his final chapter. In a respectful summary of the POW philosopher king's essays and chapters of autobiography (as well as those of Sybil Stockdale), Howes stresses Stockdale's belief that humanistic learning is the best preparation for leadership. He also extracts the essence of Stockdale's personal philosophy while leaving it up to the readers to decide if *In Love and War* is the definitive word or "only the most ambitious and skillful of many Vietnam POW attempts to grant their experience a significance it never possessed" (256).

Howes does not bother to conclude or even summarize. His book ends abruptly with the Stockdale section, leaving many threads developed along the way unconnected. Well written at the level of the sentence, the paragraph, and the subchapter (Howes is given to several headings within each chapter), *Voices of the Vietnam POWs* loses impact in its larger units and overall dimension. Part critique, part biography, part history, Howes'

book suffers from the lack of a working thesis about the nature of prison survivor discourse. One keeps expecting, for example, to find references to holocaust narratives and to the critical works that have examined them, but no such references are forthcoming. Perhaps Howes, suspicious of official stories, is fearful of offering a reductive hypothesis. Nonetheless, he has provided a compelling and richly detailed look at the dimensions of his subject.

Elliott Gruner is concerned with the wider range of representation and the symbolic power of the POW persona. His study, *Prisoners of Culture*, not only examines the POWs' self-representations, but also the iconological careers of these survivors in various media, including advertising. Gruner is concerned with how the POWs and their narratives became attached to the political agenda of those who would justify our prolonged involvement in Vietnam—as if the war were about POWs in the first place. These men, as representatives of American values, were confined and tortured. Yet their survival seemed to rescue America from defeat. They returned as heroes, and, like conquering heroes, their voices were privileged.

Gruner's investigation traces the history of the POW image. In examining the memoirs, he discovers many of the same patterns observed by Howes, including religious and frontier analogs. However, Gruner gives more attention than Howes to those titles that Howes positions on the fringes of the official story. Concerned more broadly with representation and cultural mythmaking, Gruner also explores the POW in film, fiction, and television. He gives special attention to the theme of betrayal, the role of women, race, and the relationship between prisoner and captor. On such issues, Gruner and Howes again overlap, though Gruner's analyses are more extensive.

Of particular concern to Gruner is the transformation of the POW into a public figure, whether as spokesman for a political position or as huckster for a corporation's image or product. The authority of the POW has been used to rally members of the corporate workplace to hang together against the competition, to promote self-help products, and to enhance the image of Philip

Morris. For Gruner, this exploitation of the POWs is the final stage in transforming them into “prisoners of culture”; in being invited to identify with them, we are invited to imprison ourselves.

Though Gruner rarely attains Howes’ grace as a prose stylist and has much less to offer regarding the POW experience in its historical dimension, he is far more provocative, imaginative, and engaged. Moreover, he exploits a wider range of critical tools, including such secondary sources as James E. Young’s *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* and John Hellmann’s *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. His grounding in gender issues owes much to Susan Jeffords’ work. Thus, he stands on steadier ground both in his handling of confinement narratives as a genre, his grasp of the mythmaking process, and his perception of the dynamics of difference. Gruner’s vision is a fine synthesis of the thinking of these and other writers. He has built upon them and in certain ways gone beyond them.

Gruner argues that the mythic potential of the POW experience is rooted in its mystery—its very absence from the television cameras that recorded so much else of the war. How much more mythic potential, then, lies in the MIA experience for which, by its very nature, we can have no record at all? The plight of the missing is something we can only imagine. If they are not unacknowledged POWs, then what are they? Ghosts? Ghouls? Crazies? Soldiers of Fortune forever roaming the jungles and drug routes of Southeast Asia?

MIA mythmaking is the subject of H. Bruce Franklin’s study, a book that in its first edition (1992) was available to both Howes and Gruner before their volumes went to press. Politically, Franklin seems to be Gruner’s godfather. Both are concerned with what Susan Jeffords (in her jacket blurb for Gruner’s book) calls “the propagation of national mythologies,” a term that sounds vaguely conspiratorial.

With regard to Franklin’s book, a blazing amalgam of documentation and careful argument, conspiracy is the issue. Franklin accuses US government leaders of conspiring to build a belief in the existence of numerous unreleased POWs and other unaccounted for Americans under the code-phrase “missing in

action.” He examines the making of a myth designed to prolong the war and to justify our defiance of peace agreements. By constantly revising demands and statistics, American officials created an impossible situation for the North Vietnamese. These officials demanded a full accounting knowing full well that such an accounting was impossible, and they used this failure to do the impossible as an argument for continued military action. By insisting that America would press on until every one of its sons was returned or accounted for, our leaders created an open-ended situation and the potential for an endless war.

Franklin doubts that there ever were any (or many) legitimate cases of missing in action. However, if certain soldiers and civilians remain unaccounted for, he finds no reason to believe that the Vietnamese government is (or was) hiding anything or anyone. He finds no motive for such action and many reasons to believe that the Vietnamese acted in good faith on this issue. The fabrication of an MIA myth that included the specter of a sadistic enemy raised the passions of the citizenry and cruelly exploited the pain of those who had lost a parent, child, spouse, or loved one. And, when our troops were finally withdrawn, those who had been given false hopes could only feel betrayed.

Franklin not only points out how and why this hoax was perpetrated on the American public, but why we were—and perhaps still are—so willing to accept it. He shows us, through his analysis of Ross Perot’s presidential campaign and its continuing agenda, the remarkable power of this myth. Finally, he insists that we cannot come to terms with the war and its meaning until we let go of this myth and find remedies for the political and ethical ailments on which it has fed. Through Franklin’s patient scholarship, a stance that risks the charge of fantasy and paranoia is made not only credible, but virtually irrefutable.

MIA mythmaking is also the subject of Wayne Karlin’s novel, *US*, a chilling account of an MIA hunt set in Thailand and Burma. In order to get out of debt and save his Bangkok bar, Vietnam veteran Jake Loman—part of a community of veterans who have made Southeast Asia home—agrees to guide a do-gooder, publicity-hunting congressman to meet a legendary drug lord of

the Golden Triangle. The druglord is rumored to have contact with a group of MIAs who call themselves "US." Loman, who considers the trip folly, is only in it for the money. Congressman Mundy has strong backing from the MIA believers whom he wants to please, as well as from those who only wish to keep the MIA myth alive to forestall normalized relations with Vietnam.

Karlin develops Bangkok as a metaphor for perversion and degeneracy, thus a proper home for MIA intrigue. And intrigue there is aplenty in this taut, provocative novel of outer and inner adventures. To reveal too much of the plot would be unfair to the novel, whose shadowy atmosphere, political penetration, and psychological power make it among the very best literary treatments of the Vietnam War's legacy and a worthy heir to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

"US" is, of course, also "U.S." What is missing, what has been lost in the Vietnam engagement is a part of ourselves. This understanding is reinforced in numerous ways, not the least of which are these words from the mouth of Charlene, an Australian entrepreneur who with her Japanese partner hopes to film the MIAs if Loman can find them:

Something didn't come back from the war; they're all sure it's out there somewhere, moldering in the jungle, betrayed by politicians, caged in bamboo, pieces of yourself you didn't want to look at too closely. (22)

Congressman Mundy acts partly out of guilt. As one who easily escaped service through the leaky draft system, he has come to need his "defining moment," a notion Loman and author Karlin both sneer at. He, like many who stayed at home and like many others who served, is among the missing in another sense: the missing are those who can't let go of the identity the war gave them or can continue to give them. Most importantly, the missing seem to represent the irretrievable loss of something in our nation's character. Not merely the loss of face or the loss of lives, but the loss of courage, righteousness, and innocence. Even if we do bring back a few escapees who opted out or find the

bones of a few others, Karlin's profound novel suggests that we won't have found the closure and healing that such discoveries are meant to bring. It will take quite a different journey to make us whole.

In their very different modes, both Karlin and Franklin remind us that the "Vietnam Syndrome" is alive and well (or perhaps ill) as long as the myth of the MIA haunts a significant portion of the population. Under its spell, we all become "prisoners of culture" just like the POWs whose representational power Gruner and Howes have examined. □