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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

A good place to start with Michael Allen's *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* is in Heonik Kwon's review in which he begins with an account from a short story, "The Billion Dollar Skelton," by the Vietnamese writer, Phan Huey Duong. The story focuses on the response of Vietnamese and other participants in the Vietnam conflict to an American father who returns to Vietnam in a quest to find the bones of his son, a missing in action veteran (MIA). When he promises a financial reward for bones, he is soon faced with "rising mounds of human bones" belonging to all of the participants and victims of the Vietnam conflict. (1) The search for American remains in Vietnam provides the central vehicle for Allen's account which probes the cultural, political and diplomatic aspects of this important dimension of the Vietnam conflict and its aftermath. The story begins with the issue of POWs during the conflict and intensifies during Richard Nixon's management of the conflict with the MIA issue continuing until the normalization of relations in 1992 and beyond. As Allen notes in his response, July marked the fifteenth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States, but participants in the conflict, including Senators John McCain and John Kerry, who were leading figures in Congress to support normalization and war veterans, continued to be attacked, and the Defense Department continued to report the finding of more American bones, or remains, in Vietnam.

Why so much controversy for so long over bone fragments? Allen offers a comprehensive assessment within the framework of a memory study with an inclusion of a wide range of perspectives and motivations, from the presidential level to the families of MIAs who long for the return of the remains of their loved ones. Yet what has given continuing momentum to the issue since 1975 in Allen's analysis is the politics of loss, the continuing battle over the Vietnam War itself and the political manipulation of the issue by Republicans and Democrats, as well as the unwillingness of Washington to normalize relations with Vietnam in the context of resentment over Hanoi's victory and the international Cold War context in Southeast Asia after 1975.

Allen offers a number of parallel stories that intersect throughout the study. Central to his analysis is the story of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia (hereafter cited as League) which emerged in 1966 under the leadership of Sylvia Stockdale and initially focused on the return of American POWs, primarily pilots like her husband Jim Stockdale. (24-29) Allen develops the evolution of the League and its leadership, especially the role of Ann Mills Griffiths, who served as a board member before becoming executive director in 1978 and had significant influence on Washington's policies through the 1980s. Although Allen does not offer a comprehensive analysis of American attitudes toward the Vietnam war and U.S.-Vietnamese relations after 1975, he does use the League to explore a wide range of individuals and groups beyond families that got involved in the POW-MIA issue, from wealthy contributors to political candidates like Ross Perot and free-lancing James "Bo" Gritz who led some American and Laotians on a search for POWs in Laos in 1982, a follow-up to Ronald Reagan's approved covert operation into Laos in April 1981 "to find and photograph Americans after satellite imagery showed

shadows in a Laotian prison that 'looked too long for Asians but just right for Caucasians.'" (220-221)

The reviewers are impressed with Allen's extensive archival research, interviews and primary sources and agree that he has made an important contribution to the literature on the impact of the Vietnam conflict. They do raise some questions concerning Allen's assessments as discussed below:

1. Allen's central emphasis on the politics of loss is well-received by Kwon and David Hunt. Despite past American practice in previous wars of officially recognizing MIA participants as deceased, Washington was unable to implement this after 1973. As Hunt notes, political leaders found themselves under attack "by citizens who reviled the anti-war movement, the Vietnamese, and finally the Government itself for betraying imprisoned and missing compatriots in Southeast Asia." (1) As a result Republicans and Democrats from Gerald Ford to George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton found themselves forced to respond to accusations, provide funding to search for remains and pressure Hanoi to allow Americans to lead searches, and consult with League and other MIA activists. Edwin Martini would have welcomed more cultural approaches to the construction of a contested war memory and more emphasis on the Republican contribution to the issue by Nixon and Reagan. Martini also questions Allen's linkage of the MIA activists to the "larger grassroots conservative movement" by, as Allen notes in his response, "encouraging rather than easing popular doubts about the U.S. state and those who led it, undercutting Republican presidents committed to wielding state power abroad." (2)
2. The role of the presidents and Congress in dealing with the MIA issue is a well developed dimension of Allen's study. Hunt and Martini raise some reservations about Allen's emphasis, particularly on Nixon. Hunt agrees with Allen's assessment that Nixon initiated a Go-Public campaign to counteract opposition to the war and maneuvered with the League on the POW issue and MIAs after the Paris peace agreement. (14-62, 84-85) Hunt and Martini, however, suggest that Allen downplays Nixon's contribution by giving too much weight to the grassroots effort of the League and to Hanoi's own use of the POW issue during the war in cooperation with American antiwar activists. Martini also suggests that Allen hedges on Reagan's role, downplaying the significance of the "Reagan administration's attention to Griffiths and the League [which] clearly played a major role in bringing the issue back into national prominence" and provides a "stark contrast to the relationship between the group and Presidents Ford, Carter, Bush, and Clinton." (4)
3. Considering the memories, emotions, costs, and politics of the memory of Vietnam and the MIA issue, is an even-handed approach possible by a scholar such as Allen who did not live through or participate in the contemporary conflict? The reviewers suggest that Allen has met this challenge as their reservations focus more on issues

of emphasis rather than excessive partisanship or a failure to present fairly the perspective of participants. Allen is careful to distinguish between families who started in the League and MIA activists who accepted a wide range of conspiracy theories, and the author recognizes the range of motives involved in the activities of Griffiths. Allen treats politicians from both parties with an equal amount of skepticism on their manipulation of the issue and, finally, gives credit to McCain and Kerry, Bush and Clinton, when they backed away from the League and moved to closure.

4. The Vietnamese role on the POW/MIA issue and contested memory of the war is a most important one that Allen addresses in an attempt to demonstrate Vietnamese agency, noting that Hanoi initiated the POW issue as a way to influence the American public and policy on the war. (17-22) Allen also explores Hanoi's response after the Paris accord and the disagreements that emerged over the agreements, most notably Articles 8(b) on MIAs and 21 on reconstruction aid to Vietnam. Kwon welcomes the attention that Allen gives to Vietnamese policy and notes some similarities in that both countries had to deal with MIAs and burials, "an ongoing and unending history involving most [Vietnamese] families in the southern region and many other families in northern Vietnam." (4)¹ Hunt and Martini, however, believe that Allen has given too much equivalence to Hanoi's use of the POW issue to show agency at the expense of the far greater emphasis by Washington on the MIA issue and its pressure-oriented campaign to find bones. In his response, Allen agrees that he "did not sufficiently emphasize the penalties the United States imposed on Vietnam in the 1990s as the price of normalization," but notes that "Vietnamese officials themselves were determined to create at least the perception of reciprocity as they bargained for something tangible in return for cooperation in MIA accounting." (5)

Participants:

Michael J. Allen (PhD Northwestern University, 2003) is assistant professor of history at Northwestern University. He is author of *Until The Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (2009), "Help Us Tell The Truth About Vietnam': POW/MIA Politics and the End of the American War," in *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn Young (2008), and "'Sacrilege of a Strange, Contemporary Kind': The Unknown Soldier and the Imagined Community After the Vietnam War," forthcoming in *History & Memory* (2011). He is currently at work on a book provisionally titled *Bleak House: Congressional Activism and the Confidence of Crisis, 1968-1989*.

¹ H-Diplo will have a forthcoming roundtable on Christina Schwenkel's *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representaiton* (2009) which focuses on the Vietnam effort to deal with their losses and memory issues.

David Hunt is Professor of History at UMass/Boston. He is the author of *Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early-Modern France*; he co-edited and contributed to *The American War in Vietnam*; and he has written articles and chapters on the French Revolution and French social history and on Vietnam and the Vietnam War. His book *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* was published by UMass Press in 2008, and his article "Dirty Wars: Counter-Insurgency in Vietnam and Today" will appear in *Politics and Society* in spring 2010. He is now working on a book tentatively titled "Ethnography of Revolution: A Social History of the Vietnam War."

Heonik Kwon received PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge, UK, and teaches anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of the prize-winning *After the Massacre in Ha My and My Lai* (2006) and *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (2008). His new book, *The Decomposition of the Cold War*, will be published in 2010 by Columbia University Press. He is conducting a British Academy research project on contemporary history of the Korean War and preparing an international collaborative research network project that brings together the social and international studies of the Korean War. He is writing a book on the Korean War commemorations and one on North Korean political culture.

Edwin Martini is Associate Chair and Associate Professor of History at Western Michigan University. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Maryland in 2004. His first book, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, was published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 2007. He is currently finishing work on a book project entitled "Agent Orange: A History," (under contract with the University of Massachusetts), which explores the global histories and legacies of the use of chemical agents by the United States during the Vietnam War. Martini is also the co-editor, with Scott Laderman, of *Vietnam and "Vietnam" Since 1975: Transnational Legacies of the Second Indochina War* (Forthcoming from Duke University Press).

Original and ambitious in design, meticulously researched in a wide variety of sources, Michael Allen's first book is a signal achievement. In its wake, scholarship on every administration from Nixon to Clinton will now have to reassess the impact of the POW/MIA issue on American politics. Even more impressive is the author's history of grieving families and the League of Wives of American Prisoners that emerged to speak for them and of the widespread belief that Americans remained incarcerated in Asian dungeons long after the United States withdrew from Vietnam. As he moves from one president to the next, Allen imparts a propulsive force to the narrative while at the same time offering a nuanced and disturbing meditation on cultural currents at work below the surface of current events. The outcome is a riveting account of the movement that championed the cause of POWs and that has shaped the history of the United States from the 1960s to the present.

The interpretative framework developed in the book is beautifully conceived and spelled out with great rigor. It suggests that because the United States was defeated in Vietnam, a public memory of the war reaffirming national unity could not take hold. In contrast to the commonly voiced complaint that Americans do not want to think about the debacle in Southeast Asia, Allen shows how calls for closure and forgetting were overwhelmed by a "politics of loss." (8) Some affirmed that U.S. war makers must answer for their aggressions and that the United States should help repair the damage done to Vietnam. Mainstream political forces brushed aside these demands, but fared less well when challenged from another quarter by citizens who reviled the anti-war movement, the Vietnamese, and finally the Government itself for betraying imprisoned and missing compatriots in Southeast Asia.

Many political leaders claimed to champion the cause of missing soldiers. But the pledge implicit in this avowal was not honored, because no one could liberate POWs who did not exist or find most of the combatants who lay buried in unmarked graves or lost at sea or crashed in mountainous jungle terrain. In any case, Washington policy makers and the League were loathe to seek an understanding with the Vietnamese, who were not going to release all prisoners while fighting continued and whose cooperation was required to search for remains after the war came to an end. Presidents who were trapped by their own reckless promises could not bring the last man home and were therefore certain to become targets for bitter rebuke. As the title of his book indicates, Allen aims to show that the POW/MIA conundrum brought on an "unending" quarrel over the meaning of the Vietnam War.

The author begins with the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the North who were the first to use POWs for political purposes, most notably by releasing prisoners into the hands of anti-war activists. Seeking to turn the issue against his enemies at home and abroad, President Nixon denounced the Vietnamese for mistreating POWs, and, with a cynicism that was to have fateful consequences, claimed that as many as 1,600 were being held by the communists, a

number far above the Pentagon's best estimate. Shifting focus to the grassroots, Allen emphasizes the role of Sybil Stockdale and other wives of prisoners, who were organizing on their own and whose skillful activism helped to popularize the slogans and personal stories on which the POW campaign was to depend. Many Americans readily identified with these white, middle class women and their officer husbands. The supposedly clean war pilots had waged from the skies stood in contrast to the grim and bloody combat at ground level, which featured GIs, most of whom came from more humble backgrounds (and who were seldom captured by the enemy). The suffering of living airmen in prison occasioned mass anguish, while dead "grunts" came home in body bags to be mourned in private by a small circle of family and friends.¹

As the war dragged on, peace advocates fastened on the prisoner issue by pointing out that withdrawal of U.S. troops was the only way to secure their release. It was an argument that George McGovern adopted in his 1972 campaign for president and that, after he was defeated, added to the pressures obliging Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to sign the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. Nixon wined and dined the POWs and bragged about how their return proved that he had achieved "peace with honor." (97) But even in the midst of celebration, complaints began to surface that "the last man" had not come home.

Nixon's successor Gerald Ford hoped to put the matter to rest, and a similar outcome was sought by the 1975 House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, chaired by the Mississippi Democrat "Sonny" Montgomery. In its final report, the Committee declared that there were no more prisoners in Southeast Asia and that missing Americans were dead and should be honored as heroes. Allen states that this way of constructing the public memory of war has a history going back in the United States to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and carried on into the twentieth century. Memorializing fallen soldiers reinforced a sense that dying for one's country was the highest form of patriotism and provided cover for political and military leaders whose choices led to carnage on the battlefield and suffering on the home front. The Committee was right to insist that no living Americans had been left behind in Vietnam, but Allen prefers to underscore the partisan character of Montgomery's project. "League claims," he avers, "were no more delusional than committee claims that the missing willingly 'gave their lives in the service of their country,' rather than having had them sacrificed by U.S. government officials on behalf of a corrupt and unpopular South Vietnamese regime." (171)

¹ In one of his most striking formulations, Allen speculates that no League emerged on behalf of lost soldiers in Korea first of all because the missing were mostly from poor and working class families (there were few officer pilots among them). He also suggests that, in the midst of McCarthyite hysteria, the families did not dare to protest because they were afraid, as one put it, that "the State Department will call me a communist." (134)

During the 1976 campaign, Carter won votes from a significant number of League families by criticizing President Ford for his abandonment of lost soldiers. But once in office, he could not make the issue go away. Article 8/b in the Paris Accords stipulated that the United States and the DRV should work together in recovering remains of the missing, and article 21 called for the United States to pay billions of dollars in reparations to the Vietnamese. Since the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), formed after the reunification of the country in 1976, was not going to abide by article 8/b without satisfaction on article 21, the only way to go forward was to normalize relations and embark on a joint effort to heal the wounds of war. That was a step Carter could not bring himself to take. By 1978, he had turned against Vietnam and opted for alliance with China and, according to Allen, for an intensification of the Cold War.

That tilt to the right was part of a broader conservative surge, one that Ronald Reagan was better positioned than Carter to exploit. A POW/MIA true believer, the new president went beyond Nixon in claiming that the Vietnamese were holding up to 2,500 prisoners, and his fervent pronouncements (a 1954 movie role as a POW convinced him that he possessed a keen awareness of their plight) helped the League regain momentum. Its revival was not exclusively a top-down phenomenon. Just as Nixon's machinations ran parallel to the efforts of Sybil Stockdale and the movement she helped organize, the resurgence of the League owed as much to its new Executive Director Ann Mills Griffiths and other militants as it did to the White House. The agony of U.S. hostages in Iran revived concern about prisoners in Southeast Asia, and indignation mounted as "live-sight" accounts publicized by the League seeming to confirm that Americans were still languishing in communist jails. Vigilant archival digging provided Allen with the means to show how Griffiths seized the moment to fashion a base for herself in the newly-formed Inter-Agency Group on POW/MIA Affairs (IAG) within the federal bureaucracy.

By the 1980s, the League had changed in fundamental ways. After the return of prisoners in 1973, many wives of POWs dropped out, and there was a similar movement among a number of MIA families when under Carter their missing loved ones were reclassified as "killed in action/body never recovered (KIA/BNR)." The remaining membership was dominated by a reactionary hard-core, more male than female, with fewer wives and more parents and siblings in leadership positions. In a sensitive passage, Allen traces out the differing monetary consequences of changes in status for these various kinship categories.

With the economy in disarray and the hostage crisis underscoring American weakness, Reagan and the newly-consolidated League proved adept at shaping and exploiting public fears. State resources committed to recovering remains shrank, but the president continued to retain the support of League activists who were flattered by his public expressions of solidarity and stirred by his artful elaboration on their favorite themes. The achievement of insider status neutralized Griffiths and her closest allies, while others in the POW/MIA orbit spiraled downward into a phantasmagoria of persecution and revenge.

Bypassing easy targets (the book makes no mention of the Rambo films), Allen masterfully explores the nether world of the POW/MIA movement. Its denizens ranged from soldiers of fortune such as Bo Gritz and Scott Barnes, their heads exploding with fantasies of plots and

rescues, to the “loose-cannon” would-be-president Ross Perot. (254-257) In hopes of winning friends among their new compatriots, refugees from Vietnam claimed to have seen Americans in cages in their former homeland along with “warehouses” containing shelves of cadavers. (199-201) Sanctioned by Reagan, widely publicized “covert” rescue missions liberated no prisoners, but won applause from Clint Eastwood, William Shatner, and other luminaries. (220) Providing an academic gloss, Stephen Morris, a “research associate” from the Harvard Center for International Affairs, produced a “secret document” from the Soviet archives claiming that on the eve of the Paris Accords there were 1,205 POWs in Vietnam, more than twice as many as were released a year later. (284)

At its apogée, the POW/MIA movement drew on a potent underground economy, one that produced a tidal wave of photos, dog tags, and live-sightings, so numerous that no one could keep track of them all, let alone sort out the fakes from the possibly meaningful signals that there were still Americans in Vietnam. Dummy foundations invited contributions from people who wanted to see prisoners freed, turned over the mailing lists to the Republican Party, then plowed the money they had collected back into further rounds of solicitations. In another impressive display of scholarly detective work, Allen shows how Griffiths, mid-level bureaucrats in the executive branch, right-wing congressmen, and wealthy donors anticipated the Iran-Contra gambit by mobilizing public and private funds in support of a “Lao resistance force,” which in return promised information on incarcerated Americans.

The outcome was a vehement, but equivocal form of protest, which Allen tries hard to interpret as a rejection of the Vietnam War. POW/MIA families who gravitated toward the anti-war movement tended to drop out of the League, leaving behind dissidents who were suspicious of elites, but who also advocated the use of force over diplomacy and who nursed an abiding hatred of the Vietnamese. They eventually denounced the apostasy of Nixon and Reagan while continuing to believe the fictions that these politicians had repeated and embellished in order to exploit POW/MIA mythology. They condemned the immorality of leaders who abandoned the prisoners and the missing, but it does not seem that they joined the majority of Americans who agreed that the war itself had been morally wrong.

League extremists could not prevent joint US/SRV searches for remains, which picked up steam during Reagan’s second term, or normalization of relations under Clinton. But even after the 1991 Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs exposed their shady financial dealings and categorically rejected their claims about prisoners, the culture in which they flourished remained a force. In that same year, 69% of the population agreed that Americans were still incarcerated in Vietnam and over half thought that the government was not doing enough to secure their release. The IAC was closed down, but the movement was still strong enough to damage Bush in 1992, McCain in 2000, Kerry in 2004, and McCain again in 2008. It continued to raise money (the Swift Boat Veterans who hounded Kerry drew on a \$25 million war chest) and to echo and amplify widespread alarms and resentments within the larger culture. Issues raised by the League and the movement it helped to galvanize, fit more easily into a rightist worldview and were more effectively exploited by Republicans than Democrats, but McGovern, Carter, and Clinton also mouthed

its watchwords. Michael Allen's book underscores the movement's staying power. It left me with a sense that as U.S. military commitments spread from Iraq to Afghanistan and then to Pakistan and perhaps to Yemen, defeats are likely to follow and to reenergize the "politics of loss."²

My main criticism of this outstanding work has to do with the author's commentary on Vietnam's role in the POW/MIA drama. The NLF and the DRV took the lead in using prisoners for political purposes, he declares, and share responsibility with Nixon and the League for politicizing the issue. But I am more inclined to note the qualitative difference between the two sides. Allen states that the anti-war movement, whose delegations brought home dozens of prisoners and organized monthly mail deliveries for POWs and their families, "did more than most Americans, including those in the Nixon administration, to improve their lot." (46) The Vietnamese initiative expressed solidarity with the American people and even with U.S. combatants, thereby challenging the assumption that communist enemies were fiends. It was a credible affirmation, one that goaded Nixon into a response he knew to be based on falsehood.³

In conclusion Allen strikes a positive note, one that is out of step with his overall stress on the stubborn sense of grievance among millions of people in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Instead he affirms that cooperation in searching for the remains of American soldiers promoted "healing and closure" and could become "the basis for humanistic aspirations to re-create the brotherhood of man after the horrors of war." To be sure, "Clinton's talk of partnership at a multi-million dollar excavation site as he turned a blind eye to the suffering of Vietnamese wartime survivors ignored the power imbalance between the United States and Vietnam." Nonetheless "such sentiment was key to easing the hostility

² In an astonishing testimony to the power of POW/MIA mythology, the left-liberal *Nation* magazine decided on the eve of the 2008 election to publish an article by Sydney Schanberg condemning Senator John McCain for his role in covering up the plight of U.S. prisoners of war held in Vietnam after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. According to Schanberg, these men had been abandoned by the U.S. government, which, with the help of McCain and other apologists, refused even to acknowledge their captivity: Sydney Schanberg, "Why Has John McCain Blocked Info on MIAs?" *The Nation*, 6 October 2008.

³ Reagan believed prisoners remained in Vietnam after the Paris Accords, but Nixon almost certainly did not; see, for example, the indented quote in Allen, *Last Man*, 83-84.

that defined U.S-Vietnam relations for so long, and was actively cultivated by Vietnamese leaders.”⁴ (290)

As that last phrase indicates, a belief in Vietnamese agency is central to Allen’s interpretation. People on the other side “were never mere victims of the war,” he insists, “they were also its victors . . . From its admission to the UN in 1977 to the end of the U.S. trade embargo in 1994, Vietnam profited little from MIAs save for a few million dollars in crash-site concessions and humanitarian assistance. Yet even this paltry aid was more than what vengeful Americans wanted to give. And by refusing to relinquish their official memory of the war, party leaders preserved something that may have been more valuable to them -- their legitimacy as national leaders.” (230)

This line of argument does not match up with Ed Martini’s depiction of a punishing American war against Vietnam after 1975, waged by means of an embargo, restrictions on aid from non-governmental sources, and a refusal of diplomatic recognition. As the SRV struggled to free itself from this economic and political straightjacket, Washington repeatedly added to its list of excuses for postponing normalization. Violations of Vietnamese sovereignty multiplied, as the Americans obliged Hanoi authorities to open military files and allow short-notice inspections of sensitive sites. In 1993 seven ten-man teams were “roving the countryside” where twenty years before they would have been shot on sight. (285) Seeking to create an impression of reciprocity, Allen notes the “steep fees” paid to the Vietnamese in return for help with searches, an arrangement that added up to \$9.5 million per year. (229) But on the other side of the ledger, Clinton insisted that the SRV repay loans made by the United States to the former Saigon regime and provide compensation for unreturned U.S. property in Vietnam. According to the settlement finalized in 1997, the SRV handed over \$8.5 million to cover interest on the loans and

⁴ In the American south after the Civil War and in Germany and Austria after World War I, families of missing soldiers could not rely on the state and searched on their own for remains of loved ones (*Last Man*, 117 and 120). After the Vietnam War, it was families on the winning side who had to fend for themselves in looking for remains. See, for example, Shaun Kingsley Malarney, “‘The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice’: Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 71; and Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 209-210, endnote 16.

agreed to remit the \$145 million balance in annual installments, the last of which will be due in 2018. The “paltry” rewards claimed by selected officials were in no way comparable to billions of dollars of reparations, and the ultimate balance sheet on the exchange cannot plausibly be defined as a victory for the SRV.⁵

A closer look at joint searches brings out “the power imbalance between the United States and Vietnam.” During the Christmas Bombing of December 1972, a B-52 was shot down and crashed in Yen Thuong village north of Hanoi, killing eight of the inhabitants. In November 1985, a search team showed up and, in order to move its heavy equipment into place, demolished two houses, one of which was owned by a widow whose husband and son had been killed in the crash thirteen years before. On the site of a garden owned by the widow, the team dug a crater 500 feet square and 36 feet deep and retrieved 18-20 bone fragments. Although the bones were probably those of both pilots and villagers, all were taken away to “the U.S. identification laboratory in Honolulu to determine whether they were remains ‘of American MIAs.’” The operation brought four sets of remains home to the United States and did nothing for Vietnamese war victims. I suspect that no one today in Yen Thuong commemorates the work of the excavation team and that its findings did not enhance the legitimacy of SRV leaders.⁶

A more fully realized history of Vietnam’s POW/MIA experience would identify the Vietnamese “agents” Michael Allen rightfully cautions us not to overlook and would spell out the objectives they pursued. In their dealings with the United States, Hanoi officials sought normalization, but as negotiations dragged on, the everyday work of search teams assumed the dimensions of a market transaction, a sale, the commodity being American remains. The trend broadened when in 1986 the SRV decided to open the country’s economy to internal and external market forces and to reach out toward other kinds of

⁵ See Edwin Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000* (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 202.

⁶ Commemorative projects are discussed by a number of contributors to *The Country of Memory*. For an outstanding analysis of public memory of the war in Vietnam, see Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*. The account of the excavation site is found in H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A or Mythmaking in America: How and Why Belief in Live POWs has Possessed a Nation* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), 170-176. Franklin deserves much credit for his efforts to expose the multiple falsifications generated by extremist elements in the League and for his innovative commentary on the social and cultural implications of the POW/MIA phenomenon.

customers. This at first inadvertent and then self-conscious plunge into the world economy was for Vietnam the most consequential development of the 1980s.⁷

The excavation crews were therefore pioneers and, one might imagine, precedent setters. The Vietnamese came to realize that the United States was never going to pay reparations and was not interested in a cooperative effort to bind up the wounds of war and that the only way to go forward was to satisfy the American appetite for remains. Similar reasoning lay behind the welcome extended later to entrepreneurs looking for cheap labor and to travelers who sought the services of Vietnam's fast-growing tourist industry, which operated on the principle that visitors pay "only if the experience makes them feel better." At souvenir stands in the 1990s, "vendors, particularly in the underground economy," profited "by recommodifying artifacts and everyday objects that U.S. soldiers discarded or unintentionally left behind, such as dog tags, medals, compasses, patches, cooking utensils, razors, and clothing." These artifacts amounted to only a tiny portion of the goods and services offered up to an international clientele. But note the striking echo of Michael Allen's observation that the POW/MIA economy in the United States placed the highest value on dog tags and other scraps of evidence and that in the 1980s "SRV party officials, particularly at the local level were susceptible to the same incentives that enticed American officials to trade in such information" (228). The commodification of remains prefigured commercial practices that were to follow.⁸

Allen speculates that this traffic may have been organized from above. "Party leaders did not have to deal directly with Americans to profit -- like their American counterparts, they were more likely to work through middlemen who knew the value of MIA information in refugee camps and on the black market." (228) In Vietnam today, where even top leaders concede that corruption is rampant, well-situated patrons work through client networks that sound like more elaborated forms of the arrangements crafted by "cash-strapped party

⁷ For the United States, the cost of retrieving one set of remains averaged out to \$1.7 million, which makes the "purchase" seem like an act of folly (Allen, *Last Man*, 285). But the market value of all commodities includes a symbolic component, and in this instance the intangible benefit -- the need to provide a "full accounting," as the League was wont to demand -- was obviously worth a great deal.

⁸ On making tourists feel better, see Laurel Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams, "The Past without the Pain: The Manufacture of Nostalgia in Vietnam's Tourism Industry," in *The Country of Memory*, 157; on recommodifying artifacts, Schwenkel, *American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, 87.

officials” to lay hands on the “valuable inducements and rewards” that came to those who helped move along the MIA project.⁹ (260 and 252)

When Vietnam was drawn into relations with the rich and powerful United States, its social and cultural life was bound to be refashioned. The joint search arrangement institutionalized in the mid-1980s set in motion developments that turned the attention of enterprising cadres and businessmen toward external constituencies. Foreign monies dramatically enlarged and remapped old reward systems in a way that profited some and harmed others. Michael Allen is correct to warn against casting the Vietnamese as victims, but there can be no doubting the complexity of the task that all citizens of Vietnam faced as they sorted out the possibilities and dangers in that new situation. America’s search for lost soldiers did not mark the end of the American War. It is better understood as a beginning in a new, transnational era in Vietnam’s history.

⁹ For an analysis of corruption in the SRV, see Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008). The author demonstrates how networks of malfeasance operate across lines between the “underground” and the state and how dealings with foreigners that are negotiated through tourism and the sex trade increasingly determine social relations among Vietnamese as well. My hypothesis is that a thread in this history can be traced back to the joint searches for U.S. MIAs.

The Power of Family Feelings

In the short story, *The Billion Dollar Skeleton*, the Vietnamese writer, Phan Huy Duong, tells of an American father who travels to Vietnam on behalf of his son, a Vietnam War MIA. Upon arrival, this father tells people that he came to find his son's remains, and nothing will stop him. He says that he is a billionaire, and thus will generously reward anyone who offers a helping hand by bringing him American skeletons. The quest of this wealthy bone purchaser fascinates people and the rumor about him spreads like a wildfire. Soon, hundreds of Vietnamese from near and far crowd the visitor's compound, each carrying a bag of bones that they are hoping to sell to the American billionaire. The place is quickly overwhelmed by rising mounds of human bones belonging to: "men, women, children, old people, Viets, Laos, Khmers, Thais, Koreans, Australians, New Zealanders, French... and even a few Americans." This phantasmagoric story is sordid, and, at times, even horrendous, but still contains glimpses of truth.

The Vietnam War was a shockingly violent war, but it was also a painfully chaotic war. It killed many people and many more individuals were dislocated from their homes. The combined mass displacement and mechanical killing resulted in countless missing persons and deaths away from home. When the war was over and the survivors returned to their homeland to pick up what little remained, these physically and spiritually exhausted people encountered a very challenging situation. Their homeland was not only dotted with deadly remains of weaponry, but also with the remains of unknown dead buried in shallow graves. The intrusion of foreign dead, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, into the village land accompanied another, opposite crisis in the villages' moral landscape. The bodies of many close kin were missing from home burial. This war-induced double displacement of human lives haunted the postwar Vietnamese villages, particularly in the south, resulting in lives that were never the same as they once were before the war, despite the appearance of recovery and normality encouraged by the postwar national reconstruction efforts. The reality of the missing persons and missing bodies from home burial brought anxiety, guilt and pain to the surviving families. This occurred despite the incessant effort of the postwar state authority to encourage the virtue of looking forward and hopefully, rather than looking back toward the ruins of history, together with the love of labor that the state believed was necessary for the collective's welfare.

The postwar Vietnamese state took over the role of a funeral host from the families as well. It built a cemetery at the center of every single village, where the village's war martyrs were put to rest according to the enlightened, disciplinary, geometrically ordered burial tradition of European war cemeteries. The state also educated the villagers to treat the cemetery as the most sacred place within the village. It taught them how to distinguish the modern secular sacredness of this place from the pre-modern, religious, and superstitious idea of the sacred that the villagers were accustomed to associating with their ancestral graves and altars. The state also took over the arduous task, on behalf of families, of locating and recovering the still missing war heroes. It invested enormous administrative resources to the public body-finding activity, sending the joint army and party search teams to remote central highlands and ruined old cemeteries in search of the missing heroes of the American War. Within their communal and domestic life, however, the

citizens of postwar Vietnam were discouraged from dwelling on the past and on the missing parts of their social body, especially when these missing, amputated elements of the family entity concerned those who fought and died on the opposite side of the revolutionary war. The state of Vietnam was to be a single, monopolistic undertaker in the postwar era, and Vietnamese families were not able to challenge its authority to regulate life, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, as the “objective afterlife.” Much of this has changed since. After the *doi moi* reform in the late 1980s, Vietnamese families have become increasingly free to commemorate their dead in ways they find appropriate, often in a less secular way than before. Death commemoration today is also more inclusive than before, being increasingly open to the memory of the dead who fell on the wrong side of the civil war. Until this very day, a generation after the war has ended, however, the recovery of the missing bodies remains a vital element in the story of the Vietnam-American War told and experienced in Vietnam.

Postwar Vietnamese society experienced a turbulent relationship between the political authority, and the family and community over the question of body-recovery and burial. Michael Allen’s book, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, explores the Vietnam War’s legacy in postwar American society focusing on similar material and relational complications caused by the war.

This book is a remarkable achievement in a host of ways. It amply shows that its author is someone who cherishes the central virtue in modern historical scholarship—the respect for archival sources and related dedication to ground the story it tells of the past with a body of hard evidence. The book also demonstrates that Allen is a gifted, creative craftsman of historical narrative, who is willing to venture out of the archives in search for scattered, still unaccounted-for evidence, and who is able to bring home the tales of past grievances and unfulfilled wishes told in the open air. He says, “While numerous scholars have argued that breaking down barriers between cultural approaches to the past and political and diplomatic history is essential to understanding the post-Vietnam era; such an approach has yet to appear with regard to the one issue that dominated all others in the 1970s and 1980s: the Vietnam War” (p. 9). Allen entirely succeeds in applying this valuable approach to the predominant issue of the era. The result is a well-crafted, beautifully structured account of a wounded society with a proud tradition, and a captivating account of how this society sought to grapple with wounds caused by suffering a humiliating defeat in Vietnam in an initially predictable, yet in the end shockingly unexpected way. The approach is highly effective for exploring the book’s central concern—the political destiny of the Vietnam War POWs/MIAs.

The destiny of these soldiers, who were missing from homecoming or home burial, involves two key institutions of modern American society: the families the men came from, and the state that hired and mobilized their labor of war in the first place. Allen weaves together the hearts and minds of these institutions, thereby offering the reader a highly readable drama of how the intentions and actions of those representing these institutions colluded and collided during the last years of the Vietnam War and the following decade. The drama is about how the state actors continually appropriated and misappropriated families’ desperate hopes for seeing their loved ones again, and their refusal to face the reality of death. It is also about how the family actors pursued their aspirations in the relentless spirit of “whatever it takes,” and how they sought to bring into their service the system of electoral politics, conflicts of interest within the state administration, and even the high politics of diplomacy and international peace initiatives. The

sad result was, among others, the prolongation of war's violence and the long, unnecessary delay in reconciling with the former enemy, with no other reason than the propensity to punish the heartless enemy believed to be holding American soldiers and American bodies in their captivity. In pursuing their singularly focused, self-centered activism to fight "until the last man comes home," blatantly denying the reality of death, some family actors became increasingly oblivious to the corrosive impact that their denial of death had on the moral integrity of their nation-state. They also failed to recognize the calamitous consequences that their pursuit of the unachievable goal brought to the Vietnamese lives and the Vietnamese people's aspiration to end the brutal war and to begin picking up their fragmented lives.

The story Allen offers is, therefore, not unrelated to the story introduced earlier. The politics of the Vietnam War MIAs was intertwined with the history of many of the missing and displaced Vietnamese. There is a difference between these two stories, however. The dramatic history of the Vietnam POWs/MIAs is now an episode of the bygone past, although not exactly a thing of the past yet, as the author rightly reminds the reader on several occasions. This past is actually a spectral past, which can still erupt into the present, like a poltergeist, to affect the way American politics and society evolve. The Vietnamese history of the missing dead, on the contrary, is not an episode of the past, but an ongoing and unending history involving most families in the southern region and many other families in northern Vietnam.

Modern war is not merely a clash between states and communities. It is also about bitter disputes between the state and the family. These disputes may barely be heard on the street while the drum of war is being beaten. However, the loud drumbeats can never truly silence the family's disquiet voices or quiet its anxious nerves. The remarkable German artist Kate Köllwich lucidly depicted the anguish and anger held tight in the place that an enlisted man in faraway battlefield calls his family home. The clash between the family and the state, in modern warfare, may continue after the war is over and even after the dead bodies are brought back home. Who will determine the destiny of these bodies? Who has the right to decide the home of their afterlife? These questions have been central to the theory of politics as well, since Hegel, who understood how intensely the question of a soldier's burial can complicate a family's political life, and how powerfully an inappropriate burial can shaken the family's moral ties to the sovereign order.

Until the Last Man Comes Home adds a new enthralling historical drama to the strong tradition in modern art and literature that depicts the complexity of the human condition and the fragility of moral community based on the burial drama of the soldier's body. The book is not unique in pointing out the fact that the family can take part in the drama of burial as assertively as the state. Its unique contribution to the literature is, rather, the discovery that the family's say in the burial can complicate the public world's order as effectively as the authoritative claim of the state. This remarkable revelation is according to the tradition of Hegelian political ethics and is worth further reflection and wide discussion. In my opinion, many Vietnamese would probably agree with Allen's discovery, as partly shown in Phan's *The Billion Dollar Skeleton* that also speaks of the power of family feelings. The same is demonstrated much more forcefully in the thousands of family-built graveyards and altars for the dead arising in today's Vietnamese villages. I imagine, however, that people engaged in what the Vietnamese call *việc họ*, "the work of the family," will be surprised to hear that the history of their sorrowful family feelings has a distant,

yet powerful connection to the history of indignant family feelings in some soldiers' homes far away, which preoccupied the American politics and society during and after the Vietnam War.

I first met Michael Allen at AHA several years ago. I had just given a paper on U.S.-Vietnamese relations after 1975 that, among other things, was rather dismissive of the POW/MIA activists who had kept alive the issue of “unaccounted” American servicemen for so many years, largely at the expense of the Vietnamese. Allen came up to me afterward and urged me to take activists such as those in the National League of Families and its longtime director, Ann Mills Griffiths, more seriously. While I remain reluctant to do so, Allen does indeed take them seriously, and they form the heart of his impressive recent book, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*.

Allen’s considerable talents as a writer and a researcher are on display throughout this work. He has done exhaustive research in a variety of collections at a variety of archives, and interweaves those documents seamlessly with a rich array of published sources, contemporary press coverage, and secondary literature. Allen makes several claims about how his book will transcend previous work done on both the POW/MIA issue specifically and on U.S.-Vietnamese relations after 1975 in general. As I suggest below, I am skeptical about many of these claims. That the work doesn’t accomplish all of those goals, however, does not take away from its many merits and its contribution to the literature on this important topic.

The project at the heart of the book is a political history of the POW/MIA movement, in its various incarnations, and the “complicated interplay between national leaders and grassroots activists that made the search for missing airmen the dominant means through which Americans recalled and responded to the Vietnam War.” (10) I have some reservations about privileging the POW/MIA issue over all other possibilities as “the” dominant means through which “Americans” remembered and contested the war. What about Hollywood films, for instance, or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? Allen doesn’t engage these possibilities, dismissing previous “cultural” approaches that have focused on popular culture and memorials as other significant sites where the memory of the war was constructed as contested because those approaches have “too readily assumed that the nation’s leaders successfully replaced the war’s troubling realities with more pleasing fantasies.” (10) What the nation’s leaders have to do with popular culture representations is not at all clear, but given the ways in which POW/MIA politics are infused in so many popular representations of the war and have been omnipresent at the Wall as well, it seems to me that such attention would only strengthen Allen’s argument for the centrality of the POW/MIA issue.

Allen makes two original and somewhat controversial claims (which, if not for the baggage the term carries in Vietnam War literature, might be labeled “revisionist”) about the POW/MIA issue. First, he argues that the Vietnamese were actually the first to “publicize” American POWs, and that subsequent actions by American actors at a variety of levels were “reactions” to Vietnamese actions. In doing so, he not only seeks to portray the Vietnamese as active participants in the ongoing diplomacy, but in the creation of the “issue” itself. His basis for this argument is that during the war, the Vietnamese engaged in a propaganda campaign using American POWs as props, a campaign “meant to win friends and demoralize foes in Vietnam, the United States and the wider world.” (21) Allen claims that this campaign served as a demonstration of Vietnamese “will.” (24)

Allen sees the failure of previous works on the subject to recognize the Vietnamese as co-creators of the issue as a reflection of “a long-standing reluctance” to see the Vietnamese as meaningful participants in their own history.” (24) This is a fair point to make in criticism of previous work (including my own), yet Vietnamese actors are hardly more central to his study than they are to the previous works he criticizes. Allen reveals nothing new about Vietnamese motivations or actions after the 1973 Paris Accords, tracing the actions and public statements of Vietnamese actors as they grudgingly held onto the one bargaining chip they had in their contentious relationship with the United States. For example, in chapter six Allen quotes Vietnamese foreign minister Thach reciting the familiar claim that if the Vietnamese are to be expected to help recover the remains of unaccounted for Americans, “then the Americans can help us heal our wounds of war.” This had been the consistent Vietnamese position since the end of the war, but Allen claims this position shows how the MIA issue was not “solely an American creation.” (229) Showing that the Vietnamese were active participants in diplomacy, however, should not be conflated, as Allen seems to do, with the Vietnamese helping to “create” the POW/MIA “issue.” Is there not a difference between wartime propaganda targeting a powerful foe which has invaded and occupied your country and exaggerating and, in some cases, fabricating evidence to suggest, after the war is ostensibly over, that a former foe continues to hold prisoners of war? The Vietnamese may have engaged in wartime POW diplomacy and propaganda, but the “POW/MIA issue” remains, in my view, a uniquely American creation.

Similarly, Allen suggests an equivalence of sorts between the American left and the American right in “politicizing” the POW/MIA issue. Allen argues that previous approaches (including my own) have “overemphasized” the role played by the Nixon administration in constructing the POW/MIA issue, painting it as a conservative plot rather than, as he sees it, a complex narrative with roles played by Vietnamese Communists, antiwar activists, and POW/MIA families.” (61) During the war, for example, antiwar activists from groups like Students for a Democratic Society were actively engaged in POW diplomacy, receiving select prisoners from the NLF and NVA. Allen is right that this story has been largely ignored by previous works, and it does, in part, “complicate” the traditional narrative of the POW/MIA issue, which focuses on Nixon as the architect of MIA mythology. As the rest of Allen’s “Go Public” chapter demonstrates, however, Nixon did in fact play the primary role in “politicizing” the POW/MIA issue as it would carry over into the period after 1975. Allen does show that despite Nixon’s best efforts, the campaign essentially backfired on Nixon, as concern over POWs became for many Americans as much a reason to end the war as a reason to continue. But “complicating” the narrative in this way does little to change the fact that it was Nixon, far more than the other actors Allen wants to include in the narrative, who politicized POWs. As with his attempt to grant the Vietnamese greater agency in this narrative, Allen suggests a form of equivalence between wartime diplomacy and postwar politics that I find less than persuasive. Still, he has offered an original take on the topic that is worth of debate and will no doubt shape future discussions.

Allen is at his best when tracing the MIA movement itself, and the “complicated interplay” between personal and national politics. He takes all the actors in his narrative seriously, including those on the fringes of the POW/MIA lobby, who have, rightly or wrongly, been dismissed by previous studies. Regardless of their seeming irrationality, Allen carefully

considers the stories and the actions of MIA “activists” who believed, against all hope, odds, and evidence, that their loved ones were still being held alive in Southeast Asia. Allen’s most significant contribution to the literature on this issue is likely his close attention to the internal dynamics of “the League,” in its various incarnations, and how internal battles over leadership and direction affected its relationships with other major political actors and its ability to achieve concrete results. Allen has painstakingly reconstructed that history by drawing on a variety of previously ignored sources, including unpublished documents from the League and some of its key members.

In taking these actors seriously, Allen shows the ways in which their activism and their ideology cut across the new political landscape in post-Vietnam War American culture.

For instance, Allen demonstrates that despite its overwhelmingly conservative politics and the military background of most in the movement, many members of the League rejected and condemned the American military adventures of the 1980s and 1990s. “MIA activists,” he writes, “were more interested in fighting the still unfinished Vietnam War than in waging new wars” (8), a tendency clearly on display during the run-up to the American war with Iraq in 1991. (266-67)

Even the richly detailed political story Allen constructs, however, is not without its problems. Chief among them is Allen’s hedging on Ronald Reagan’s role in the resurgence of the POW/MIA issue in the 1980s. In focusing on the agency of grassroots actors, Allen often seems to marginalize the significance of major players, namely Presidents. Allen begins his fifth chapter by claiming, as he does with Richard Nixon, that other historians have exaggerated Reagan’s role in this resurgence, at the expense of grassroots actors. “Reagan,” Allen claims, “did not cause renewed interest in missing Americans so much as he capitalized on it.” (181) Later, he adds that “Reagan and Griffiths led the League’s resurgence, with Griffiths playing the more vital role.” (193) In Chapter Six, however, Allen opens by writing that “Reagan gave the league hope. A League ally since the 1960s, he worked wonders for the group, which enjoyed more money, media, coverage, and political influence during his presidency than at any time in its history.” (216-17) The Reagan administration’s final report on the issue claimed that the President’s efforts “raised domestic consciousness of this issue to the highest level since the end of the war,” and Ann Mills Griffiths, the League’s executive director also claimed that Reagan brought “‘massive,’ ‘total,’ 180 [degree] change right down the line.” (217-219) Allen goes on to argue, against the claims of the administration and the League itself, that “[i]nstead of deliver[ing] results, Reagan offered spectacle,” alluding to the pseudo-paramilitary operations supported by the administration. (230)

Allen rightly suggests that the increased ties of the league to the administration and, thus, the state, undermined the League’s “anti-government” rhetoric, just as he rightly shows in his closing chapter that the most significant gains in actual accounting were made under the Clinton administration, hardly a close ally of the League. But this underlying tension between the League’s rhetoric and its politics does not change the fact that the Reagan administration’s attention to Griffiths and the League clearly played a major role in bringing the issue back into national prominence. Allen suggests that it was Griffiths’ initiative in developing powerful allies in the White House that drove the resurgence, but as his own narrative demonstrates, this was

clearly a two-way street. The Reagan administration's active support of Griffiths and the League stands in stark contrast to the relationship between the group and Presidents Ford, Carter, Bush, and Clinton.

Relatedly, I am not entirely convinced by Allen's claims that MIA activists or the League itself should be considered a major part of the growing conservative movement during the 1970s and 80s. In his introduction, Allen writes that the League "helped fuel" the conservative resurgence in American politics, yet that narrative flits in and out of his story and, frankly, seems like more of an afterthought than a major consideration. Clearly, the League shared some characteristics with conservative grassroots activists during this period, particularly its anti-government rhetoric, and the frequent contradiction between that rhetoric and the clear reliance of these activists on state power, as Allen points out. But that rhetoric was increasingly easy to find in the U.S. at the time; what is not as clear is that this overlapping rhetoric justifies placing the League in the growing literature on grassroots conservatism. As Allen demonstrates, even at the seeming height of its power in the 1980s, the group was essentially a fringe movement. Allen's argument is not that the League was important institutionally to the movement, but that its message about Vietnam and the politics of loss "united the disparate strands of the conservative movement." (191) I have little doubt that there existed some overlapping interests between MIA activists and other grassroots conservatives, but based on the evidence Allen offers, it is not clear why we should believe that the League was a significant force driving it forward.

While Allen offers an engaging, well-crafted political history of the POW/MIA movement itself, I am less persuaded that it achieves all of the rather lofty goals he lays out for it in the introduction. There he claims that by drawing on "government records, unpublished sources from MIA activist groups, popular reporting, and published scholarship this study transcends the documentary limits and disciplinary boundaries of earlier work" (10; emphasis added). It is true that Allen's archival research on this issue is unparalleled and impressive. His access to unpublished sources from the League in itself is a major contribution to the literature. But how exactly these sources, all fairly conventional for historians, help to transcend the "disciplinary boundaries" of earlier studies is not clear. Compared, for instance, to H. Bruce Franklin's landmark *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America*, Allen's seems quite traditional. This is not a criticism of the work itself, but of the claim made by the author on its behalf. While "impressive" is a word easily used to describe this book, "interdisciplinary" is not.

Similarly, Allen claims in his introduction that his focus on the "local, national, and transnational dimensions of POW/MIA activism promises not only to complement the new international history of the war and emerging histories of grassroots conservatism, but to integrate them." I have already expressed my concerns about the connections Allen makes, or fails to make, between MIA activists and the larger grassroots conservative movement. Thus it is hard for me to imagine how these two recent scholarly trends are "integrated" in his work, particularly since I fail to see what, exactly, is "transnational" about his work.

Allen focuses overwhelmingly on American actors in his narrative. Those actors, from the local to the national level, are focused on foreign relations and things international, to be sure, and some of the action in this story occurs in places like Vietnam and Cambodia, but that does not, in my view, make this a "transnational" history. When he does quote Vietnamese officials, his sources

are all in English, and most of the Vietnamese statements are culled from published newspaper accounts. Again, this is not a criticism of the work itself, which certainly need not be based on multilingual, international archival sources. I would simply like to know what makes the book “transnational” in the author’s view.

Allen and I clearly have different takes on several aspects of the POW/MIA issue. His focus on the grassroots actors involved in this story adds a new dimension to the scholarship, yet I feel that in focusing on them he risks over correcting previous approaches by minimizing the roles played by Nixon and Reagan. Similarly, in attempting to make more visible the roles played by the American antiwar left and the Vietnamese themselves, he risks constructing false equivalencies that minimizes the dominant American role in creating, sustaining, and wielding the POW/MIA issue.

Despite my disagreements with some of his conclusions and claims, however, I remain impressed with *Until the Last Man Comes Home*. It is a well-researched, well-written account that makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the POW/MIA issue, U.S.-Vietnamese relations, and recent American political history.

Author's Response by Michael J. Allen, Northwestern University

This July marked the 15th anniversary of the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations. On July 14, the Embassy of Vietnam and the U.S. State Department celebrated the occasion by co-hosting a Washington reception featuring remarks by former President Bill Clinton and Senators John Kerry and John McCain, guests of honor at the affair.¹ In the early 1990s these three men helped end the decades-old U.S. diplomatic and trade embargo against Vietnam over the protests of the politically powerful POW/MIA lobby, winning its undying antipathy. Thus as they were feted for their part in fostering the normalization of relations between once bitter adversaries, they faced the latest in a long line of attacks from their critics in the POW/MIA community, this time in the form of the July 2010 issue of *American Conservative* magazine, which featured the 8,000-word cover story entitled "McCain and the POW Cover-Up" by Pulitzer-prize winner Sydney Schanberg.² In it Schanberg alleged that McCain had suppressed evidence proving the abandonment of American prisoners of war in Vietnam while serving on Kerry's Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs between 1991 and 1993, charges sure to incite the Tea Party faithful who seek to supplant McCain with his more conservative challenger J.D. Hayworth in Arizona's August 2010 primary. This was not the first time McCain had faced such criticism. As its dated references to McCain as "the Republican candidate for president" hinted, Schanberg's story first appeared in the October 6, 2008 edition of *The Nation*, which ran a condensed but otherwise identical version in an issue ironically titled: "10 National Security Myths Debunked!"³ Not only did the self-proclaimed "flagship of the left" print Schanberg's piece, but the Nation Institute, "established to extend the reach of progressive ideas," financed its "research," which consisted of lies and innuendos that had long circulated in POW/MIA circles.⁴ Meanwhile, between the publication of Schanberg's

¹ "Vietnam-U.S. Diplomatic Ties Marked in U.S.," 16 July 2010,

<http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/story.php?d=20100715114046> (accessed 13 August 2010).

² Sydney H. Schanberg, "McCain and the POW Cover-Up," *American Conservative*, July 2010,

<http://www.amconmag.com/issue/2010/jul/01/> (accessed 13 August 2010).

³ Sydney H. Schanberg, "Why Has John McCain Blocked Info on MIAs?," *The Nation*, 6

October 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/issue/october-6-2008> (accessed 13 August 2010).

⁴ <http://www.nationinstitute.org/p/schanberg09182008pt1> and

http://www.nationinstitute.org/p/about_us. To their credit, both *American Conservative* and *The Nation* printed scholarly rebuttals to Schanberg that make his errors of fact and analysis clear. See

article in *The Nation* and its reprint in *American Conservative*, the Defense Department identified the remains of 41 Americans missing from the Vietnam War.⁵

These recent developments suggest the ceaseless nature of POW/MIA accounting, and remind us of its powerful hold on American politics and U.S.-Vietnam relations. They also highlight the unusual polysemy of the POW/MIA issue. Seldom do political magazines from the right and left print the same article against the same figure on the eve of separate elections, especially when that article concerns events decades old. Yet strange bedfellows have long typified POW/MIA politics, as have lasting enmities. Indeed, it was its protean quality that made the search for missing Americans an ideal vehicle for endless argument over the meaning and memory of the Vietnam War.

Until The Last Man Comes Home writes the history of that argument, contending that a multivalent politics of loss developed around American POWs and MIAs during the Vietnam War that has yet to fully abate. It seeks to prove three interrelated claims. First, that the intensity and duration of popular and official accounting efforts on behalf of missing Americans during and after the war were historically anomalous and require explanation that goes beyond psychology or tradition to include matters of politics and diplomacy. Second, that POW/MIA mobilization emerged outside the U.S. government, and endured because it lent itself to people inside and outside the U.S. state bureaucracy who used it to pursue agendas that were often at odds with official aims. Third, I argue that while POW/MIA activists contributed in subtle but important ways to conservative political gains since the late 1960s, they did so by encouraging rather than easing popular doubts about the U.S. state and those who led it, undercutting Republican presidents committed to wielding state power abroad.

Uniting these claims is my commitment to decentering and disaggregating the U.S. national state without denying its power. I seek to strike this balance by scrutinizing the social construction of memory politics. In contrast to most prior scholarship, which has presented the POW/MIA issue specifically and American memory of the Vietnam War more generally as a largely undifferentiated national diatribe dominated by Washington elites and divorced from the war's realities, my work presents POW/MIA accounting efforts as a transnational melee in which real conflict between the United States and Vietnam spilled over into important arguments among Americans in ways that inflected contests between politicians and political parties, impinged on U.S.-Vietnam relations, and further redounded to domestic differences over the war.

<http://www.amconmag.com/article/2010/jul/01/00021/>

<http://www.thenation.com/article/powmias-amp-john-mccain> (accessed 13 August 2010).

⁵ DPMO News Releases, http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ and http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/2008/ (accessed 13 August 2010).

Heonik Kwon and David Hunt discuss the details and implications of this approach in mostly favorable terms. Edwin Martini, on the other hand, is "impressed" by my research but unconvinced by my analysis. While gratified by Kwon and Hunt's reviews, I will devote most of my attention to Martini's critiques, continuing the conversation we began in the H-Diplo roundtable on his book *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, which readers of this forum may wish to revisit.⁶ While Martini and I agree that the Vietnam War continued after the 1973 Paris Peace Accords and beyond the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, we disagree on the implications of this fact for historical research. Whereas I see the war's continuation as an opportunity to identify longer trajectories within what we agree was an unending conflict, Martini seems to see postwar conflict as a means to explain how wartime realities were reversed or erased. And where I view POW/MIA accounting efforts as a way for the war's myriad combatants to continue fighting over their irreconcilable differences, Martini sees it as a tool of powerful Americans, particularly Republican presidents, who used it to vanquish their opponents politically after having failed to do so militarily.

This interpretive difference has important ramifications for when and how we begin our stories. Like other scholars of post-Vietnam memory, Martini emphasizes Richard Nixon's role in the emergence of the POW/MIA issue, and Ronald Reagan's part in sustaining it. In contrast, I show that American POWs were first publicized by their Vietnamese captors, who used these favored sons, most of whom were white middle-class officer aviators, to illustrate the costs of protracted war while promising something valuable in return for U.S. withdrawal. To encourage an end to U.S. intervention, North Vietnam and its southern partners released dozens of American captives to antiwar groups and U.S. officials from the mid-1950s through the 1972 elections, continuing a pattern of Viet Minh repatriation of American fliers that dated back to World War II. Though such efforts failed to bring a quick end to the conflict, they did mobilize antiwar activists and POW/MIA families, groups on opposite ends of the political spectrum that were both consumed by the war. By helping to return POWs who decried the war, antiwar activists dramatized the amity of the Vietnamese and American people while placing the onus for continued conflict on the U.S. government. Meanwhile, the military families who dominated the nascent POW/MIA movement combated this message by promulgating alleged enemy abuse of American POWs, seeking to elevate American hardship over far greater Vietnamese suffering in order to attract public sympathy. Nixon enflamed these arguments upon taking office and Reagan embellished them, but they began among less exalted Americans reacting to North Vietnam's success in POW diplomacy and in its wider fight for international public opinion. In that fight, Vietnamese communists and antiwar Americans were neither powerless, nor invisible. Both were engaged in a high-stakes, high-profile struggle to separate the American people from U.S. government policy. Their success in that regard—ironically enhanced by Nixon's failed bid to counteract their advantage through his own initiatives—

⁶ H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews, Vol. IX, No. 12 (2008), <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/InvisibleEnemies-Roundtable.pdf> (accessed 13 August 2010).

can be seen in the skepticism many POW/MIA activists evinced toward Nixon's Vietnamization strategy, which I document in greater depth than any previous study.

For some, those doubts grew into the conviction that Nixon abandoned American servicemen in Indochina, and that other U.S. officials concealed that fact. Because that belief and its proponents in the MIA lobby exerted such malign influence on U.S. policy toward Vietnam after 1973, Martini prefers to disassociate it from "wartime POW diplomacy and propaganda" practiced by Vietnamese officials and ordinary Americans. Rejecting my attempt to connect wartime antagonisms to their postwar expression, he charges me with drawing false equivalencies between Vietnamese and American actions, between the political left and the political right, and between wartime and postwar conflicts. In place of my alleged conflation, he posits cleavages: between Vietnam's wartime victory and its postwar victimization, between widespread antiwar sentiment during the war and presumed popular militancy after it, between "wartime diplomacy and postwar politics," with the former allowing for transnational power struggles but the latter dominated by American presidents.

Clearly there were important changes in U.S.-Vietnam relations and in American politics after the war's formal end, changes that occupy my full attention in five of my book's seven chapters. Yet as Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien said during normalization talks in 1977, "it was impossible to completely sever the future from the past," and the controversies that followed the war reflected patterns and ideas that grew out of the conflict itself, along with traditions of war memorialization and state-making that I discuss in my third chapter and which Kwon treats in his review.⁷ Martini's apparent disinterest in the origins of the arguments that swirled around missing Americans after 1973 strikes me as both ahistorical and illustrative of the misguided emphasis on undifferentiated American power that plagues too many studies of post-Vietnam memory. While presidents were powerful, their ability to harness popular anger over American losses in Vietnam had limits, limits that resulted in part from the bitter antagonisms the war produced in the United States and in part from presidential inability to deliver an MIA accounting without Vietnamese assistance.

Martini criticizes me for "minimizing the roles played by Nixon and Reagan," but this is baseless. No other study of this issue has delved more deeply into the inner workings of the Nixon and Reagan administrations, or the other post-Vietnam presidencies, or consulted the same range of executive branch records. The question is not whether I should focus on presidents—I have unearthed considerable new evidence on presidential POW/MIA stratagems, as Hunt's review indicates. The question is whether historians should "take seriously" other participants in this story, as Martini puts it, or whether we should ignore them. Given that the central mystery of any work on this subject is how, why, and to what end a majority of Americans were convinced that their countrymen remained in

⁷ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War After The War* (New York: Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, 1986), 148, quoted in Allen, *Until The Last Man Comes Home*, 186.

Vietnamese captivity after 1973, it simply will not suffice to dismiss those who held and propagated such views as a "fringe movement." Rather our task is to explain how this historically aberrant idea became so perdurant both at the grassroots and inside the U.S. government.

Any answer to this question must feature the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, which did so much to create and sustain public interest in the issue, along with those the League enlisted in its cause, including Senators and Congressman, military officers and civil servants, Vietnam veterans, and sundry anti-communists, including numerous Vietnamese refugees, who made the idea of continued captivity plausible to more casual observers through their incessant claims to that effect. Such people must be taken seriously because high-ranking government officials took them seriously, in the United States and in Vietnam, as did most Americans. They must be taken seriously because they appear frequently in published and unpublished sources on the subject, which, however "traditional," remain our best guide to historical understanding. Finally, they must be taken seriously because their words and deeds help us grasp the meaning of a phenomenon that would otherwise confound us. Martini, for instance, argues that Nixon and Reagan produced and prolonged an issue that he also maintains had little relation to the conservative movement that they represented, a baffling proposition. When we examine MIA activists more closely, we find that they endorsed conservative causes and candidates, solicited conservative donors with the help of conservative fundraisers, and appeared regularly in conservative publications to substantiate and popularize conservative ideas. A close look at their political agency, in other words, helps to explain why Nixon and Reagan, not to mention Robert Dornan and Jesse Helms, courted them. But it also reveals a surprise that other scholars have largely overlooked: namely, that they regularly impugned Republican presidents and policymakers who proved incapable of restoring the prewar status quo. This revelation yields new insights on the tensions the Vietnam War bequeathed to conservatives who came to dominate U.S. politics in its wake. Those tensions still roil the political right today, as *American Conservative's* attacks on John McCain remind us.

My effort to present the POW/MIA accounting effort as a more participatory process is not intended to obscure responsibility for the POW/MIA issue or the violent purposes to which it was put. I insist throughout my book that Vietnamese agency does not equal culpability for the war's violence or for the persistent belief inside the United States that Americans remained in captivity after 1973, though it did at times lend itself to the twisted logic of those who held such views. Likewise, I distinguish between domestic actors throughout my story and explain how they changed over time, as Kwon and Hunt attest. Such distinctions are so integral to my analysis that it is hard to summarize them without reproducing my book, where I address most of Martini's concerns directly. For instance, I write that while some may worry that my emphasis on Vietnamese agency and grassroots actors "ignores power imbalances that make Nixon more culpable than his opponents," the fact that "many who participated in POW/MIA activism did so to end the war and mitigate its violence" only "reiterates the degree to which American leaders were ultimately responsible for the war and its losses. While many groups used captive and missing Americans, only one—the Nixon administration—consistently used them to prolong the war" (59, 15). Elsewhere I

exonerate antiwar activists falsely accused of antagonizing POW and MIA families, writing that they "did more than most Americans, including those in the Nixon administration, to improve their lot" (46). I characterize U.S. postwar policies as "hurtful" and "self-serving," and call the more outlandish claims made by MIA activists "unfair and one-sided," "absurd," and "grotesque" (91, 164, 200, 211, 220). In one characteristic passage I write that those who criticized Vietnam for trading American remains for diplomatic favors "[stood] history on its head" by refusing to mention "that the bodies in question fell into Vietnamese hands while Americans waged war on the Vietnamese people, that the reconstruction aid at issue was already promised by the Nixon administration, and that Vietnam received nothing but broken promises and popular hostility in return for its cooperation" (168). In another I observe that Vietnamese negotiators "asked only for what they were promised, and were willing to settle for less—by the end they sought only trade and humanitarian assistance, and even then Americans were unwilling to make peace" (200). I note, too, that when Vietnamese officials finally made headway against their antagonists in the MIA lobby in the late '80s and early '90s "they profited little save for a few million dollars in crash-site concessions and humanitarian assistance. Yet even this paltry aid was more than what vengeful Americans wanted to give" (230).

Such statements make clear my view that Americans in the MIA lobby and their allies in the U.S. government bear responsibility for the punitive policies the United States adopted toward Vietnam. Why then does Hunt, in an otherwise favorable review, join Martini in seeing my "commentary on Vietnam's role in the POW/MIA drama" as a mistaken bid "to create an impression of reciprocity" in POW/MIA diplomacy that is at odds with the historical record? The simple answer is that I did not sufficiently emphasize the penalties the United States imposed on Vietnam in the 1990s as the price of normalization, an oversight I regret, though one that does not seriously compromise my claim that American and Vietnamese officials used the MIA accounting process to advance normalization in that decade. The more complicated answer is that most of my sources show Vietnamese officials themselves were determined to create the perception of reciprocity as they bargained for something tangible in return for their cooperation in MIA accounting.⁸ Creating such an impression was as important to Vietnamese negotiators as it was objectionable to some Americans, which helps to explain their prolonged diplomatic standoff over the issue.

But Hunt's remarks also indicate his reluctance to make assumptions about "Vietnam's POW/MIA experience" without consulting Vietnamese records. I share that reluctance, and so wish to address those concerns. I am not a historian of Vietnam, and I am careful not to speculate about what the POW/MIA issue meant to Vietnamese people or how it impinged on their daily lives. While I am gratified by Kwon's view that many Vietnamese would appreciate my view that the grieving family "can complicate the public world's order as

⁸ On Vietnam's determination "to address both sides of the problem," as Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach put it in 1987 see Allen, *Until The Last Man Comes Home*, 50, 89-91, 167-68, 186-90, 229-30, 258-60.

effectively as the authoritative claim of the state," I am open to Hunt's suggestion that many must also resent American accounting efforts. Vietnamese memory of the war is a subject I try not to comment on beyond noting its importance to Vietnamese leaders, an official interest well documented in the many fine studies on the subject, Kwon's included, and reiterated in his review here. My book concerns American memory, specifically the American POW/MIA accounting effort and its political and policy consequences. The actions and statements of Vietnamese leaders were important to the emergence and persistence of POW/MIA activity, particularly as they were presented to U.S. policymakers and the American public in English-language sources. That is why I discuss them. The internal deliberations of Vietnam's Politburo regarding captive and missing Americans or the impact of its decisions inside Vietnam, however, were beyond the scope of my research agenda. Knowing more about those matters may have enhanced my analysis in places—it might, for instance, have allowed me to fact-check analyses by the Defense Intelligence Agency that the Vietnamese state encouraged the rash of "live-sighting reports" among Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s, assertions I could only qualify and contextualize in my book (228). But even if records relevant to such controversies exist, it is unlikely that Vietnamese officials would open them to an American researcher given the sensitive place the POW/MIA issue still occupies in U.S.-Vietnam relations. Besides, the agenda that Vietnamese officials pursued through POW/MIA diplomacy was fairly clear from their public and private statements—the question is why did so many Americans misrepresent and malign legitimate Vietnamese aims and peaceful overtures? It is a question that haunts virtually all scholarship on the unending Vietnam War. I hope my work has shed new light on it. I thank my colleagues for their thoughtful, and thought-provoking, reviews, and thank the editors of H-Diplo roundtable for organizing this exchange of views.

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