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A conversation with Michael J. Allen
Author of *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*
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Q: Why was and is there such a dogged search for Vietnam War POWs and MIAs? How is the Vietnam War different from other wars in this aspect?

A: Because the United States lost the war. The plight of American POWs and MIAs became a way for Americans to understand how and why that defeat happened, and the effort to recover these men offered those averse to that outcome the ability to do something about it.

Q: How did this obsession with recovering POWs and MIAs affect the war and its outcome? How did it affect the American people?

A: It fueled the hostility so many Americans harbored toward the communist enemy while at the same time contributing powerfully to the war-weariness that sapped popular support for the war over the long-term. Sooner or later all parties to the conflict came to see the return of American POWs as among the most powerful inducements for U.S. withdrawal from the war.

Q: Who did Americans choose to blame for the inability to recover these men? Why?

A: Initially, most blamed Vietnamese communists, whom they accused of barbarism and treachery. But from the start critics of the war charged that it was American leaders that refused to withdraw from Vietnam who were responsible for the plight of POWs, MIAs, and their families, and this view grew more widespread as the war dragged on over so many years.

When the POWs returned in 1973, those still waiting on word of the missing demanded that U.S. government leaders take action on their behalf. When those leaders proved unable to satisfy such demands, advocates of the missing turned their fire on foreign policy moderates inside and outside the U.S. government, whom they blamed for American lassitude.

Q: What is surprising about the message you present in this book? How does it differ from other points of view?

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Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

2-2-2 Until the Last Man Comes Home

A: Among the book's surprises are its strange bedfellows. It shows that liberals as well as conservatives, critics of the war as much as its supporters, Vietnamese and Americans, all had a hand in promoting captive and missing Americans. And while the most committed POW/MIA activists were political conservatives, they often parted company with Republican leaders like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan even as liberals like Jimmy Carter and John Kerry used the fate of POWs and MIAs to foster peace with Vietnam, usually with the support of Vietnamese officials. This complicates earlier understandings of the POW/MIA issue as a far right phenomenon.

Another surprise is the extraordinary influence wielded by a small group of POW and MIA activists. While others have discussed their power in the war years, my book uses new evidence to show their influence on U.S. politics and policy up to the present day. Earlier accounts of POW/MIA influence focused on popular culture, whereas my work incorporates high politics and diplomacy.

Finally, my book departs from prior accounts by presenting post-Vietnam accounting efforts in the context of a longer tradition of body recovery and memorialization. Generally, the POW/MIA issue has been seen as something peculiar to the Vietnam War. I confirm that POW/MIA accounting efforts intensified after the Vietnam War, but I also show that they were part of a longer history, which helps explain why they were so important to national leaders as well as individual family members.

Q: Why do you take such a different perspective?

A: Most authors have been strongly critical of POW/MIA activists and the presidents most supportive of their cause—Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan—whereas I discuss a more diverse cast of characters in more dispassionate terms. In part, this difference is based in sources. Prior studies relied heavily on popular culture and published sources, whereas my study is more archival. I found untold stories and unexamined perspectives in the archives and wanted to add them to the story. But it may also be generational. Because I was born after the war's formal end, I may have been less interested in refighting the Vietnam War or casting judgment on its participants than in understanding their experience as part of a longer story of American attitudes toward war and the national state. Approaching the war less as a singular event and more as a key moment in a long history of American war memorialization helped me to see a wider array of historical actors and to develop a deeper sense of what they were up to.

Q: How did you conduct your research? Did you draw from all sides of the argument, including Vietnamese sources?

A: My research combined unpublished materials from government archives with Congressional records, POW memoirs, popular journalism and the opinion press, institutional histories, novels and films, and a wide array of scholarship on related matters. My most valuable archival sources were the records of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, which included over one million pages of declassified

[more]

3-3-3 Until the Last Man Comes Home

materials and staff records—over 285 feet of materials in all. I also attended POW/MIA family meetings and conducted oral interviews with leading figures from the story I tell. I do not read Vietnamese and did not consult Vietnamese sources except when they appeared in translation in U.S. archives and libraries. I also leaned heavily on Vietnamese historiography to understand what Vietnamese authorities attempted to accomplish through POW/MIA diplomacy.

Q: Who should read this book?

A: Anyone interested in U.S. politics or war-making, or the politics of war, should read this book, as well as anyone who seeks to better understand the Vietnam War and the people who fought it. Anyone interested in how ideas and foreign policy intersect or who is curious about how grassroots activists shape U.S. policy. Anyone who has visited a national cemetery or has lost a loved one to war. Finally, the book's depiction of the political and diplomatic consequences of indefinite POW detention and abuse in the Vietnam War may interest those who are seeking to understand related problems in the war on terror.

Q: What do you say to those who feel you belittle the POWs' and MIAs' experience and the efforts of POW/MIA interest groups with your take?

A: Any sense that I have belittled my subjects may say less about my book than about the cultural codes and conventions that have long surrounded this issue. As with all actors in my book, I have stated the case of POWs and POW/MIA activists as clearly as I can, using the most neutral language I could muster. Whenever possible I have quoted them so that they can speak for themselves. If there are uncomfortable revelations in the book, I did not invent or exaggerate them. But neither did I suppress what I found in the archives in order to protect the reputation of POW/MIA activists or out of concern for their well-being. I simply reported what my research revealed, subjecting them to the same scrutiny that I applied to their antagonists, which Americans are not used to seeing.

Most POW/MIA activists I've spoken to while researching and writing the book have welcomed my interest, even when I've asked them tough questions—most fear public forgetfulness more than public scrutiny. The fact that I've written a book about them is a sign of my respect for them, even if I don't always support their agenda.

Q: You focus on the concept of memory in this book. Why is this concept meaningful to your argument?

A: Memory is a way of historicizing the past's continued presence in our lives. We can't go back and relive the past or experience it in any direct way, and yet we constantly revisit it through the stories we tell about it, stories that necessarily highlight certain facts and forget others, since no story can include everything. Some of those stories are more satisfying than others—either because of the events they include and exclude or because of who tells them, perhaps both—and over time those that are more meaningful to most people become the public memory of an event. By presenting our relationship to the past

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4-4-4 Until the Last Man Comes Home

as a *process*, memory allows us to study our relationship to the past much like any other historical process is studied, using evidence to shed light on who remembered what and why.

Understanding memory as intentional rather than random, contested instead of neutral, is a way to explain why people spend time, money, and energy evoking the past. It makes it possible to ask what they were up to and what they achieved in social and political terms, rather than adopting purely psychological explanations. In other words, it makes this study possible.

Q: Where does the title of the book originate?

A: The title originated with the advertising tagline of the 1984 Chuck Norris film *Missing In Action*, which later became a rallying cry in POW/MIA circles. When I saw it on a sew-on patch at the 31st annual meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families in 2001, I thought it was a perfect motto for a war that in some sense never ended.

Q: You discuss VIVA (first known as Victory in Vietnam and later Voices In Vital America) POW/MIA bracelets and their popularity with the American public. Why are they so significant?

A: The bracelets are one of the ways that I show the influence of the POW/MIA issue on ordinary Americans and try to get at its meaning for those drawn to it. Worn by millions, they meant different things to different people. But at their most basic level they fostered a connection to captive and missing warriors whose plight could not improve until the war ended. They encouraged their wearers to identify with POW/MIA families, but also fostered the same war-weariness that turned many of those families against the war.

Q: How has the conservative ascendancy resulting from the Vietnam War affected U.S. politics today?

A: The answer to this question depends largely on one's politics, which necessarily influence opinions about the direction of political change in recent years. But conservatives have dominated U.S. politics since 1968, and it is too early to tell if the last two elections signal an end to that dominance or a temporary interruption. The answer will hinge in large part on whether Democrats can slough off popular perceptions that they are weak, perceptions acquired during and after the Vietnam War through the story told in my book. Whatever is to come, policy options will be limited by the fiscal and ideological inheritance left to us by Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and the two George Bushes, who made their way in U.S. politics by portraying their opponents as inconstant and unpatriotic, charges each substantiated through references to the Vietnam War.

In a more direct sense, the POW/MIA issue continues to shape national politics as John McCain's 2008 presidential bid makes clear. McCain's defeat suggests that some Americans may have tired of fighting over the Vietnam War. Indeed, McCain is the third Vietnam veteran in a row to lose a presidential election to a non-veteran, though he is the

[more]

5-5-5 Until the Last Man Comes Home

first Republican to do so. Still, it is premature to speculate on whether Americans have turned the page on the Vietnam War or the ideas of warrior abandonment to which it gave rise, particularly with the United States committed to two wars with no end in sight and little prospect of victory.

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116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808

919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) 919-966-3829 (fax)

CONTACTS

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, 919-962-0581; gina_mahalek@unc.edu

Sales: Michael Donatelli, 919-962-0475; michael_donatelli@unc.edu

Rights: Vicky Wells, 919-962-0369; vicky_wells@unc.edu