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CLOSURE

Roger Ellis

It was my friend, Max, who recently started me thinking about this again. My wife, Joyce, and I were over at his place for a barbecue late last summer. His kids were running around chasing the puppy (or the puppy was chasing them), Suzanne and Joyce were in the kitchen (was Joyce pregnant yet? how were Suzanne's classes coming along?), and Maxwell was flipping some steaks on the grill outside (he was starting back to work from an injury last winter, falling off a ladder).

Ordinary stuff: hardly the setting from which I expected a very depressing and disturbing ethical issue to arise. Max and I were just shooting bull awhile back there, talking over this and that, when he looked over at me and asked: "So, this year's an anniversary, you know. Twenty years?"

I hadn't the vaguest notion what he was talking about. My daughter Alex was twenty this year, but he had never met her. Had I been twenty years teaching in Michigan maybe? But no, it was only eighteen. Maybe he was talking about Suzanne?

"You haven't been married twenty years, Max, have you?" Maybe he had been, but I'd only known him for a couple of years now (he and Suzanne were really my second wife's friends), so I didn't know for sure.

"No, no," he said. "Not a wedding anniversary. Something else. Saigon," he said. "It's been twenty years now."

Max and I are both veterans of that crazy war—different years, different tours of duty. He was a Marine in '67, mainly working the Delta, and I was there with the 101st Airborne up near Phu Bai in 1970. We were both infantry. But from the time I first met him, I knew that Maxwell recalled his experience differently than I did: he always had a black POW/MIA flag flying at his house.

"Saigon was 1975, Max," I remarked. "The NVA ran the South Vietnamese army out and took the city in '75."

"Yeah, well, I mean the peace treaty," he told me. "That bastard, Kissinger, signed the Paris Accords in '73."

I still find myself boggled by the notion, even as I write this, that there are probably hundreds of captured American servicemen living in slavery—trapped—somewhere in Vietnam. Max used the word "closure:" he said he'd like some "closure" to the POW/MIA issue once and for all.

He, like the rest of us interested in the subject, had long ago resigned himself to the sense of powerlessness which is the ordinary citizen's lot. ("So what're you gonna do? Make the Pentagon 'fess up? Get some action? Gimme a break, man, go figure.") But unlike a lot of us, Max couldn't lay it to rest. He had read every book that had come out on the subject during the postwar period.

Over the steaks sizzling on the barbecue he reminded me that "they" were still

over there: still loading trucks, working the fields, pouring concrete—whatever the dink-in-charge feels needs doing. And in the meantime, here back home, life goes on as if those captives had never existed.

Max brought some of it back into focus for me that afternoon, a little too unexpectedly. As he talked I reminded myself that Rush Limbaugh and Heidi Fleiss were the media darlings, and you can bet that neither Connie Chung nor Larry King would commit media suicide by dredging-up the POW/MIA issue. Now in 1993, Max thought that something final, something definite needed to be said about all of that: either an official yes or a no, an admission that there were still POWs there or not. Closure.

So Max started me thinking on the problem to the extent that I couldn't let it rest. After we got home from his place I did a little mental arithmetic on the situation. Suppose, for example, we take someone who served over there with me in '70: a door gunner, an Intruder pilot, anyone. I tried to recall a few faces—even went to the trouble of pulling out an old box of pics down in the basement. There we all were in piles and piles of fading photos and slides, and many names I could no longer remember.

Some of them, though, I did recall—almost guiltily. After all, if it hadn't been for Max's remarks over the barbecue, my old war buddies never would have entered my mind, I'm certain. But suddenly, staring at the photos that night, the problem became concrete for me. Just suppose that one of those faces—Donny Paxton, maybe, or Nick Sandolino—had been captured in 1970. That would mean he was still there after about twenty-three years. Was it possible?

Well, certainly, I realized. A person in his twenties back then would be in his forties now. We know that when the French gave up and signed their treaty with the Vietminh after Dienbienphu in 1955 and 1956, they had reported nearly 37,000 French POWs. But 10,754 were ever repatriated. Why? Because the Vietnamese held on to them, feeling that POWs could be valuable for decades in any future bargaining point with France: for money, technical aid, even diplomatic recognition. The French POWs were called "pearls," and over the years France had quietly paid out a fortune to North Vietnam "to get" some of their men back.¹

Were Americans held prisoner too, after 1973? Our government has admitted that more than 2,400 of them were MIAs at the time of the cease fire, and only about 700 were officially repatriated after the Paris Accords were signed. So, if French servicemen had been held for years, their existence denied by the Vietnamese, then why not Americans, too? As late as the fall of 1988, in fact, the famous war novelist, William Stevenson, seemed to receive confirmation of this fact in Hanoi from Truong Chinh, the party hard-liner who had been Ho Chi Minh's second-in-command for decades. That, by simple mental arithmetic, was fifteen years after the Paris Accords. If American prisoners were alive in Vietnam after fifteen years, then why not after twenty?

I know that for many people today the issue just seems like so much sappy sentiment or paranoia, an historical belch from the lunatic fringe. But it's not, really: it's a critical issue of political ethics, and the situation is probably going to arise again

and again. The issue will keep affecting all of us. The Congressional investigative committees, for example, denounced the possibility of live POWs during the eighties, then hastily reclassified all the documents to keep anyone else from looking into the matter. Years ago, Congress did the same thing after the Korean War, signing off on that chapter of military history with thousands of captured American servicemen still in the hands of the North Koreans and Soviets.²

I suppose it's only natural for a government to regard POWs as an embarrassing issue after treaties are signed, and for politicians at every level to just write the captives off as more casualties—albeit live ones. After all, who wants to go to war over a couple of thousand POWs when peace is in the air? In addition, a lot of those MIAs were captured in Laos, the CIA's dirty little secret war which lasted for years after the Vietnam debacle was concluded.

Most Americans, I suppose, accept the official denial as final. But I remember some guy talking in one of Studs Terkel's books³ in the mid-eighties about learning "the facts" on Southeast Asia from an ex-CIA officer, and declaring with surprise: "It's not just stories from some crazy liberal any more. It's facts." Yet for most folks today, historical "facts" are boring and the POW/MIA thing is a dead issue. At most they might ask: didn't Stallone and Chuck Norris make big money pumping out dumb war movies on that theme? *Missing in Action*, for example, and *Rambo*?

I went out to my local Blockbuster and rented a pile of those things, and was genuinely surprised because the scriptwriters had evidently done some research on the topic. I had overlooked this fact when I'd originally seen these flics years ago. Like Max, I had followed the POW thing in some books and articles, and a lot of that information, I now noticed, surfaced in the films. More than that, though, those action flics reflected a national attitude that now, ten years later, is quickly becoming "politically incorrect." And that surprised me.

The flics had been made in the eighties, a decade when Reaganism ruled supreme and the Pentagon sat high on the hog (uneasily sharing the saddle with the CIA). War fever, that groupthink obsession with military force⁴, dominated much of our foreign policy: Grenada, Libya, Nicaragua, and then Panama and the Gulf. As I watched Rambo blasting the files of the intelligence spook with his M-60, and Chuck Norris landing his burning chopper full of rescued American servicemen, I wondered about that misguided patriotic fervor which had swept the country at the time—and generated the films. And one thing that disturbed me was the fact that even in *my* mind, I seemed to recall Reagan's *dramatic gestures* more than his *abysmal failures*.

The situation in El Salvador, for example, continued to worsen as Reagan and the CIA committed more and more Pentagon aid to propping up the corrupt right-wing government and the venal military. And the killers of the Maryknoll nuns, years before, were never brought to justice; nor were the murderers of the Jesuit priests (tragic heirs in Reagan's script to Romero's legacy of resistance?).

The Iran-Contra scandal, too, had exploded in all their faces: Ollie North tearfully wrapping himself in the flag while he did doody on the Constitution, the Ayotallah gleefully wasting Iraqis with U.S. weapons—and we know what that led to under George Bush. And speaking of Bush, how could I forget the uneasy alliance he

engineered with Noriega (another guns-for-drugs deal, a CIA favorite), to help the B-movie Hollywood administration supply the southern front of its Nicaraguan destabilization effort?

Perhaps, I thought, the POW/MIA issue had been a similar historical casualty of the Reagan years, now buried under years of dramatic gestures that attracted more attention—and many more patriotic movies glorifying the "rescue" theme: *Rescue* (where kids have to rescue their dads held by the nasty North Koreans), and *Iron Eagle* (where a kid goes to rescue his dad held by those nasty Arabs). And so on, and so forth. All reflections—along with *Top Gun*, *Flight of the Intruder*, and others—of the mind-numbing patriotism blitz of the eighties, culminating in the Gulf War. Yep, who wanted to mull over Vietnam POWs and a lost war, who wanted to examine guilt and shame and betrayal in the real world, when Tom Cruise and others were victoriously blowing away Arabs and Koreans and other foreign slimes in the movie houses? Give us Stormin' Norman instead, right?

But to get back to Norris and Stallone and the POW/MIAs, there was also the disturbing matter of the films' historical inaccuracies, despite their vague basis in historical fact. I'd use the word, "lies," except that Hollywood has never been big on telling the truth. What I mean by "inaccuracies" is the way in which the films changed the outcome of those real-life rescue efforts and gave us happy endings: they posited that the MIAs were actually POWs, and were still alive! Rescue was possible! Now, the fact is that the Reagan administration did try to rescue some of the captive servicemen whose existence Kissinger had been so eager to deny ten years before⁵. But that effort—like Jimmy Carter's attempted rescue of the Teheran hostages, for which Reagan made him a laughing-stock—was a complete failure. And Reagan never returned publicly to the POW/MIA thing again.

Of course, Hollywood never pushed the point very much either: the writers were content to maintain focus mainly on Norris and Stallone, the rugged individualists who did the right thing despite the bureaucrat civilians (does this remind you of Ollie North, or Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" films?). So the celluloid postwar Vietnam endings—which implied that our government *knew* the POWs were still there—drowned this implication in cheap hero-worship.

To American filmgoers, the notion of live POWs became just a fiction: another piece of virtual reality like CNN uplinking the Gulf War or a laughtrack on *M*A*S*H*. Our POWs/MIAs became a heart-tugging, pathetic backdrop for the star power of Norris and Stallone. The fact that there just might be POWs rotting in Asia became a "what if" speculation officially denied by the government and pursued only by the lunatic fringe led by Ross Perot.

But those of us who *don't* live in virtual reality should be asking more questions of those guys. For one thing, did Ronnie and his chums continue to mess up in Southeast Asia with a dumb foreign policy? Let's look at it. Code-named Grand Eagle (and commonly referred to as "Bohica")⁶, Reagan's abortive rescue actually seemed to provide the basis of Chuck Norris' 1984 film: *Missing in Action*. Bohica, by the way, is an acronym for "Bend Over, Here It Comes Again," a patently contemptuous description of how the mission's participants regarded the Pentagon's

unserious attitude towards this operation, and others like it.

And why did this rescue mission fail? In the assessment of its leader, Scott Barnes, the CIA was afraid that any official disclosure of American servicemen being held as prisoners would provoke a national investigation that would likely uncover ongoing CIA involvement in Laos and other nasty matters.⁷ Barnes even claimed that when he reported finding POWs, he was ordered (by someone higher-up) to kill them in order to keep the story quiet—which he refused to do, and, as a result, barely escaped from Bangkok with his life. This "real-life" theme of betrayal by the American government did surface in Stallone's 1985 film, *Rambo*. Unlike Norris who was merely up against the sleazy Oriental (long a Hollywood stereotype), Rambo also had to do battle with the CIA officer in charge of his mission.

Yet, here too, the importance of this betrayal by U.S. Intelligence Services was clouded over by Hollywood's love affair with the hero. Recall, for instance, the touching final moments, after the Italian Stallion has laid his combat knife across the throat of the Washington spook-in-charge, demanding that the CIA go in and get the rest of the POWs. Rambo walks outside to the chopper pad, casts a sad glance over the prisoners he brought back, and declares to his old Special Forces C.O. (the good guy) that veterans like him only want to be loved by their country as much as they loved it. Then, covered in sweat, he strides across the pad and into the lush, glorious, Pacific Rim sunset.

End of film, and, apparently, end of Hollywood's interest in the POW issue. It was almost as though the POWs became a sideshow to the star, Stallone. They were like window-dressing in the background, as we marvelled at Sylvester dragging them through the jungle to safety. Could Rambo withstand torture at the hands of Orientals? Could he recover from the cruel death of his Cambodian girl friend? Could he blitz all those Russian Spetsnaz troopers, NVA regulars, and even a fully-armed Russian assault helicopter in order to bring the poor POWs back to friendly territory in Thailand? Forget the issue of POWs, folks, and marvel at the star and his rippling, sweating muscles. In his next movie, *Rocky*, he'll pound the Russkie in the boxing ring for you.

Well, of course, I hadn't expected any earth-shattering cinematic commentary from Southern California ozone-, cocaine-, and cash-clogged consciences. These weren't Robert Altman films, right? They were just Cannon products produced by the Golan-Globus duo who gave us the Bronson flics and other splatter-for-dollars trash.

But in another sense I was disappointed because only a month before I had seen Barbara Trent and David Kasper's shocking film, *Panama Deception*. It had won the Best Documentary of 1992 at the Academy Awards, signalling what good photojournalism could do with controversial political issues. Those film-makers, harassed by government officials at every turn in the production process, nevertheless finished their film and gave the lie to Bush and the Pentagon who had told us that the Panama invasion was "in the national interest."

Ah, well, I'm reminded that patriotism is the final refuge of scoundrels. Why was there not a crew of journalists with some integrity at work in the Persian Gulf, who could eventually give the lie to that one, too? After all, we surely need something to

counterbalance Schwarzkopf's stirring series (also available for rental at Blockbuster) that tells his side of that sordid story. How many "smart bombs" actually turned out dumb? And who were really behind the "Citizens for a Free Kuwait" organization, which hired Hill & Knowlton to PR that war to Congress and the American people? Will we ever know? Or care? A lot of folks have never heard of Hill & Knowlton, but they're very impressed by the fact that Ted Turner made a bundle off the war.

* * *

We enjoyed Max's barbecued steaks that night, and after returning home and thinking this whole thing over, I reached a few depressing conclusions. First, I suppose the saddest thing about the POW/MIA issue is that no one really cares any more. Oh, the families do, of course, and a lot of the vets as well. But they don't count. Families have no political clout, and the veterans organizations have enough on their plate trying to get compensation for victims of Agent Orange and Post-Vietnam Stress Syndrome to spend their resources on the POW/MIAs.

Secondly, those POWs are not coming home because no one—except their families—wants them anymore. The Vietnamese certainly aren't going to release them, now that they're bending over backwards to the world community in order to gain respect and qualify for desperately-needed foreign aid. Better for the Vietnamese that the Americans remain in Ho Chi Minh City (since by now they've been assimilated into Vietnamese society) operating a noodle shop, perhaps, or training people in computer skills. Ah—but what if (I asked myself) one of those 20,000 Americanized Vietnamese who *fled* their country in 1975, and have now *returned* to do business there, meet up with an "ex-POW" in his noodle shop? What a strange conversation might then ensue?

On the other hand, can we expect the U.S. powers-that-be to want the POWs back? Hardly, I think. The CIA have their own agenda, which certainly does *not* include opening their sleazy files from the 70's and 80's and 90's to anyone. The other intelligence agencies are unlikely to permit such a thing for the very same reason. And if one is to believe the incredible account of CBS TV News' *Sixty Minutes* reporter, Monika Jensen-Stevenson, who tried to do a documentary on this whole affair, then any number of people in Foggy Bottom have vested interests in sabotaging such a repatriation effort.⁸

Third, it's dead certain that Clinton isn't likely to touch the issue. He, too, has enough on his plate trying to clean up the mess of the past twelve years: the homeless, the gay-bashing broadcast evangelists, the issues of health care, the deficit, the Supreme Court, and on and on. Nor will the Pentagon leave him at peace, as events in Yugoslavia continue to unfold. "Air strikes" we're told, but on whom? Who are the bad guys there? After all, they're Caucasians like us, aren't they? Except for the Muslims, of course—but then, aren't our pilots defending the Shiites in southern Iraq even as I write this? Go figure.

Fourth, it's not the Vietnamese who are the only bad guys here. War is nasty, yes, and the Vietnamese treatment of their prisoners is beyond belief. Vietnam, like Red China, deserves no respect from our community of civilized nations. But are our own government agencies any better in their betrayal, their labelling of POWs in

1973 as war casualties who were "expendable" for the sake of the Peace Accords? (Rambo, by the way, complained of this to his girl friend, moments before she was blown away by the Asiatic villain). I think we need to re-define the term, "enemy," for ourselves before we end up wasting the wrong dude. After all, I've heard that Nixon secretly promised the Vietnamese over four billion dollars in postwar reconstruction aid, which—because of Watergate—he was never able to pay them. So maybe they had some gripe when they held on to the prisoners?

Fifth, it's dubious whether the mainstream media will ever look into this matter again, raking up all the old facts and expecting people to remember, or even to care. You couldn't make "news" with it, could you? What would such a feature do to news team ratings, do you think? Nor is the issue what you might call the "subject-of-choice" of the wolf-packs following Arsenio, Oprah, Stern, Letterman, and the rest of the pop-culture popularizers.

Are the print journalists much better? Witness their sorry performances before-and-after Panama and the Gulf War. As writer/editor Erwin Knoll recently commented on the shameful coverup of Pentagon/CIA failures by *The Washington Post* when he was a reporter there: "It just blew me away....It just shocked me. It planted in me the first doubts about this line of work I had chosen for myself."⁹

In the last analysis, I suppose, the POWs and I and Max are doomed to be consigned to the hands of the scribblers of intrigue/adventure novels, and to the Hollywood hacks. In the former category, Ken Follett and Robert Ludlum are the best kind of "closure" that Max and I are ever likely to see. And in the latter, can we hope that Tinseltown will confine its sanguine tastes to the *cop genre* in the future? That way some good people might get working in the *political genre* without feeling the pressure for more bloody splatter in their scripts.

Come to think of it, that's not an unrealistic hope for average Joes like us. In fact, Hollywood might just give this country the best kind of "closure" it needs on the POW/MIA issue—Stallone and Norris notwithstanding. If nothing else, there's still a whopping good tale to be told here: the betrayals, the deceit, the secret war in Laos after Vietnam, the coverup, the drugs, the money, etc.

So let Mel Gibson and Arnold S. and Mr. VanDamme and the others kick all the Rastafarian/Arab/Latino narco-terrorist/Japanese yakuza/butt in a Caucasian macho-splatter-homophobic-celluloid fantasy world. Yeah! Go to it, boys! Meanwhile you and I will be waiting in the lobby for the POW/MIA story to be told. Perhaps, as Barbara Trent and David Kasper would tell it, or maybe even as Spike Lee, Spaulding Gray or Whoopi Goldberg would tell it.

And let's be sure to get our popcorn at the door, folks, because the truth is going to be stranger than any fiction.

NOTES

¹See Dr. Bernard B. Fall, *Hell Is a Very Small Place* (New York: Lippincott, 1967).

²See the *New York Times*, "U.S. Says Soviets Held Korea War POWs," 27 September 1993, page A12.

³Studs Terkel, *The Great Divide* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. 223.

⁴E. Bradford Burns' conclusion in his book, *At War in Nicaragua: The Reagan Doctrine and The Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 183.

⁵What ever happened to dear Doc Kissinger? When Nixon limped away after Watergate, Kissinger opened a pricey consulting firm, specializing in advising American firms on strategies for doing business in the Far East, and with newly-emerging socialist nations in particular. So much for Kissinger and Nixon's "China Policy." And is Tricky Dick still on the lecture circuit across the U.S.A.?

⁶Barnes gives a complete account of this fiasco in his excellent book, written with Melva Libb: *Bohica* (Canton, Ohio: Bohica Corporation, 1987).

⁷An excellent account of how the CIA tried—and failed—to continue the Vietnamese war by fighting from Laos after the Paris Accords, can be found in Jonathan Kwitney's book, *The Crimes of Patriots: A True Tale of Dope, Dirty Money, and the CIA* (New York: Norton, 1987). Christopher Robbins' book, *The Ravens* (New York: Crown, 1987) details the exploits of American pilots who worked for the CIA during those years.

⁸Monika Jensen-Stevenson & William Stevenson, *Kiss the Boys Goodbye: How the United States Betrayed its own POWs in Vietnam* (New York: Dutton, 1990).

⁹Bill Lueders, "The Infiltrator: Gadfly Erwin Knoll Creeps Into the National Dialogue." *Quill* (July-August 1993), p. 20.