



*Traumatic Defeat: POWs, MIAs, and National Mythmaking* by Patrick Gallagher.

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In *Traumatic Defeat*, historian Patrick Gallagher offers two compelling case studies of postwar societies grappling with defeat, the fate of their missing, and the return of their prisoners of war. The first half of the book concerns West Germany after World War II and the second considers the United States after the Vietnam War. In both cases, the author concentrates on movements made up of people whose loved ones were either missing or in captivity. They advocated for the rapid release of all POWs and a meticulous accounting of the missing. The German movement quickly faded away after the last group of POWs returned from the USSR in 1955. By contrast, the American movement grew over the decades, as many of its members refused to believe the North Vietnamese had released all prisoners in 1973. They claimed that many Americans remained in secret camps to be used either as future bargaining chips in negotiations or simply as slave laborers.

To explain the cause of this difference in the two movements, Gallagher points out that the Germans were preoccupied with the fate of actual missing soldiers, while the American movement morphed into a fringe political group more intent upon shaping US collective memory of the war than in recovering missing men. The American POW/MIA movement remained influential throughout the 1980s and 90s largely thanks to the support it received from political and cultural figures like Ronald Reagan and Charlton Heston. It succeeded in convincing most Americans that many US servicemen had been abandoned in Vietnam, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Even today, this myth's persistence is evident in the ubiquity of the black-and-white POW/MIA flags that still fly on private and government buildings across the United States.

The book's first two chapters describe the intense interest in the POW/MIA issue in postwar West Germany, when the Soviets held over two million German prisoners. Poor Soviet accounting led many Germans to hope their missing relatives, even years after the war, might be alive and in a POW camp. Even after the final accounting and repatriation of POWs by the USSR in 1949, many Germans still had missing loved ones they hoped were still alive in the USSR, victims of the Soviet policy of retaining prisoners they had determined to be war criminals. These last 27,000 German prisoners were released in 1953-55, at which point the German movement quickly dissolved.

The book's other three chapters examine the American POW/MIA movement during and after the Vietnam War. This differed from the post-World War II movements chiefly in scale. While the Germans were searching for information on millions of missing men, the American government believed the North Vietnamese might be holding perhaps thirteen hundred prisoners in 1973. When only 561 men were released, some relatives of men unaccounted for would not accept that they were likely dead and pushed for further investigations.

Over time, the movement came to be dominated by non-relatives of the few remaining POWs and MIAs who espoused the cause in order to attack the federal government or redefine Americans' understanding of the war. Their promulgation of myths of secret camps where American

prisoners still continued to suffer recast the war not as a defeat in which American soldiers victimized civilian Vietnamese, but rather as a struggle in which they were themselves victimized, first at the hands of their captors, and later when they were abandoned by their own government.

Gallagher convincingly demonstrates that the movement capitalized on its wide public support, the new genre of POW rescue films, and the tacit adoption of the black POW/MIA flag as the American memorial symbol for the Vietnam War. Despite an utter lack of evidence, as late as 1996 nearly two-thirds of Americans continued to believe in the existence of US POWs in Southeast Asia (141).

The book also contains a discerning account of President Richard Nixon's use of the early POW movement to help justify continuing the war until an "honorable peace" could be achieved. Nixon saw POW wives and families as a useful emotional counterweight to the domestic peace movement. In place of the military's traditional classification of long-missing personnel as "killed in action" (KIA), the Nixon administration popularized the designation "POW/MIA." That is, they were treated as potential POWs until their deaths were conclusively established—an impossible standard in most cases. This new designation effectively consigned MIA families to a gray zone between hope and grief. So politicized did the issue become that attempts by American widows and relatives of missing men to move their loved ones to KIA status were opposed by POW/MIA activists claiming to be protecting the legal rights of the missing soldiers.

Gallagher turns next to the exasperating story of gullible celebrities (Heston, William Shatner, Clint Eastwood) and politicians (Reagan and Ross Perot) promoting conspiracy theories about secret prison camps that enabled con men to persuade Americans to contribute millions to fund private efforts to locate and rescue the remaining POWs. These critiques will interest scholars working on such topics as President Nixon's Vietnam withdrawal policies, the legacy of the Vietnam War in the United States, and, more generally, POWs and post-conflict recovery studies, and the propagation of conspiracy theories.

The author is less persuasive in making a case that the German and American movements were similar instances of a common social phenomenon. In fact differences outweighed similarities. The postwar hopes clung to by millions of German relatives of missing soldiers were actually quite reasonable. Gallagher describes several instances of German families welcoming home men who had never appeared on Soviet POW rolls or had been declared dead. "Reasonable," however, does not describe the hopes cherished by American relatives after the mid-1970s. These families, rather than coming to terms with their losses, fell prey to long-lived conspiracy theories.

Some interesting questions are left unexplored. Why, for instance, did American political and cultural elites embrace a myth that their German counterparts rejected? The author does observe that American politicians lacked the will to contradict the claims of POW/MIA activists and risk the consequences at the ballot box. As representative Paul McCloskey put it in 1976, "No one's got the guts to tell these people there's no rational basis to believe any of these men are still alive" (140). Would not similar electoral dynamics have been at play in West Germany in the late 1950s? And if not, why so? But, given the many keen insights Patrick Gallagher packs into the 156 pages of his well written main text, we should see the questions he leaves open not as shortcomings, but invitations to further study.