Commentary by
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Still Counting the Days of Our Longest War

One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam. Timothy N. Castle. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. 370pp. $24.95.

Hanoi, Saturday, 13 March 1999. It's another gray day in Hanoi, a damp misty fog shrouding the city even as the sun struggles to rise. Hanoi is a city caught in contradictions, caught between generations, caught—as is the entire country of Vietnam—between past and present. It's a short jog from the Ministry of Defense Guest House where we are staying—and enjoying the modern conveniences of indoor plumbing and electric heat—to Hoan Kiem Lake, or the Lake of the Returned Sword, a lake rich with myth, one steeped in glories of the past. After repelling Chinese invaders in the sixteenth century, King Le Thai To begrudgingly yielded his powerful sword to a turtle swimming in the lake—with Vietnam free, the sword had to be returned to the gods. In 1999, Vietnam is again free, and once again the gods have exacted a price. Jogging through the mist you see Vietnamese peddling their way to work on one of the million or more bicycles in Hanoi, you see breakfast being cooked on the sidewalk—over open coals—and chamber pots being emptied into the gutter. You see squalor and misery, then turn the corner to witness the opulence of the Hanoi Opera Hilton, newly opened just last year.

The contradictions are everywhere: Our tour of the Temple of Literature, which celebrates a millennium of Vietnamese culture and education, ends on a busy corner where street urchins hawk pirated copies of Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name*, a book the *New York Times* calls an "unflinching look at the reality of war and of life under a totalitarian regime," and a book officially banned for sale in Vietnam. As we walk past a long line of school children, a nine-year-old boy calls out, without rancor or hostility, "me Viet Cong." In the quarter of a

century since the fall of Saigon, Americans have continually asked what we lost—as a nation and as individuals—in Vietnam. The Vietnamese, no less puzzled, wonder what they've won.

George Herring, in *America's Longest War*, puts it this way:

> For Americans, coming to terms with the war remained more difficult. The anger and bitterness were subsiding and the war seemed to be passing into history, but the process was slow and painful. The United States was spending $100 million per year in a persistent effort to resolve those MIA cases that seemed to be the remaining obstacle to peace. That effort appeared unlikely to succeed, however, and in any event did not address the real problem. "The American people stubbornly refused to make peace with the Vietnamese," journalist Joseph Galloway observed, "even as they mourned the fact that somehow the war wouldn't go away and leave them alone. . . ." Embittered and trapped in denial, they could not see that "peace is *made*, not found." (321)

Perhaps, but how do you make peace with a nine-year-old Viet Cong? How do you make peace with a totalitarian regime that bans "unflinching" looks at the reality of its past? How do you make peace with the Western entrepreneurs who operate an opulent Hanoi Opera Hilton just a block from Hoa Lo prison? Most importantly, how do you make peace with a country so mired in myth that such obvious contradictions aren't even noticed, much less discussed?

Witness the traffic in Hanoi—a sea of motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, one that literally moves in waves, one alive with incessant honking—and you begin to sense just how complicated it all is. It's almost impossible to think over the din, and perhaps it's best not to think at all. Our 40-passenger bus somehow parts this sea and we cross the Red River on our way to the 371st Air Force Division—we're visiting the Dragon Division, one of the most decorated fighter units from the Vietnam War. Our guides proudly lead us through their divisional museum, carefully cataloguing the powerful sword wielded by these air dragons during the war. Much of their history, their story, their myth, strikes a hollow chord with me—a former B-52 crewmember. It's hard to make peace when memories still war. But the reaction of my colleague, author Tim Castle, is almost visceral. We pause in front of a large picture of one of the glorious exploits of this air division—one commemorating its aerial bombing of Lima Site 85 on Pha Thi mountain in northern Laos on 12 January, 1968. In his book on the loss of

this top-secret site to communist forces, Dr. Castle argues that "the PAVN air attack against Site 85 was unprecedented in the history of the Vietnam war" (79). And yet, less than two months later, when Site 85 actually fell in March of 1968, no official in the Vietnamese hierarchy claims to have any knowledge of what happened on March 11th—and most particularly no knowledge of the eleven U.S. airmen missing since that day. Pausing in front of the picture, the contradiction be-

tween the attack depicted and the complete lack of information—despite over twenty years of research by Dr. Tim Castle—about the ultimate fate of nine of the eleven servicemen clearly troubles Tim. Making peace, putting the past in the past and looking to the future, will be harder for all of us after visiting the Dragon Division. Perhaps we've stayed one day too long in Hanoi.

The story of Site 85, of course, is far more complex than this, and the contradictions and duplicity prevalent in both Vietnamese and U.S. government accounts of the event. In his preface to his powerfully presented account of the loss of Site 85, *One Day Too Long*, Tim Castle calls this tragedy "an especially agonizing event" (ix). Indeed it is. It's a story as complicated as it is compelling, and in Tim Castle's telling of it, as well researched as it is finally elusive. This is a tale told by an expert, yet still full of sound and fury. The elements of the plot are those of a spy thriller: a top-secret radar bombing site, political intrigue, lies and deceptions, cover stories and "official accounts." But Dr. Castle's book is no spy thriller, nor does it pretend to be. *One Day Too Long* is a meticulously researched account of a very sad day in the history of a very sad war. Carefully, perhaps even painstakingly, documented (Castle appends 75 pages of notes to the 250 page text), this story also has a human dimension, and Tim gives it a very human face. Interviewing hundreds of people associated with the loss, from the families of those killed and missing, to the commanding officer of the site, to high government officials—U.S., Vietnamese, and Lao—Dr. Castle has done his homework for this gripping account.

And Tim Castle has the appropriate credentials to tell this tale truly. After serving two tours in Southeast Asia during the war, Tim also has been a close student of the war's aftermath. He served as a researcher and senior investigator for POW/MIA cases in Laos, and currently is a professor of National Security Studies at the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He knows the POW/MIA issue from the inside, and he's studied it carefully from the outside as an academic. He knows personally the tension between public policy, on the one hand, and the pain of personal loss—in the absence of any real accounting for it—on the other. Most of all, he knows the murky atmosphere, a ghostly fog of sorts, that has settled over the whole POW/MIA issue, and he sets out to penetrate it—as completely as possible—in this text. Given the magnitude of his task, given the formidable forces arrayed against his investigation, and given the thirty-year history of prevarica-

tion and duplicity that he hopes to set straight, we can forgive him the 75 pages of notes. Indeed, we should applaud this precise and unequivocal record of what he calls "the ultimate betrayal" of American servicemen.

Dr. Castle's insightful analysis invites consideration of a number of key issues surrounding the loss of Site 85. How important, for example, was the mission to use the radar at Site 85 to guide bombers into the area around Hanoi? What were the real stakes in this strategic bombing campaign? One thread in revisionist histories of the Vietnam War maintains that an unfettered bombing campaign earlier in the war would have brought the war to a swift close, say in 1967 or 1968. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments for and against such a reading of history, but Dr. Castle's insights on the specific role Site 85 played in such a strategy are revealing:

> The leadership of the U.S. Air Force, and particularly those at 7th AF responsible for managing Rolling Thunder, faced a dilemma. Tasked with a politically driven air campaign against North Vietnam and, therefore, unable to use the bombers most suited for such an operation, the Air Force attempted to carry out the mission by using a jury-rigged ground-directed bombing system flown by F-105 fighter-bombers. This need to demonstrate a war-fighting competence compelled the Air Force to embark on a bold initiative that quickly developed into a meaningless exercise, in which bombs would fall on targets of questionable value. Nonetheless, confronted with an embarrassing lapse in capability, the Air Force had "done something." (247)

What we had done, as Castle's story makes clear, is consign more than a dozen airmen to their death in order to be seen as doing something. The jury-rigged system was based upon the radar at Site 85, and the "Sky Spot" system of guiding F-105s into targets was the mission the men at Site 85 signed up to do. They did so believing that their contributions would dramatically shorten the war; they did so believing in the rightness of their cause. What they were never told is that they were merely pawns in an elaborate chess game between services, a game where bombs usually fell on questionable targets and where the real stakes focused on doing something rather than doing the right thing.

And doing the right thing quickly becomes the major focus of Dr. Castle's revealing text. As he states in his opening chapter,

> This book's goal, then, is to provide an authoritative account of the Heavy Green [code name for Site 85 operations] program. What emerges is a covert operation conducted within the framework of a duplicitous and unparalleled American foreign policy—the presidentially directed introduction of American military men into neutral Laos to improve the effectiveness of U.S. bombing in North Vietnam. (6)

How this could ever be construed as the doing the right thing perplexes Castle; that it was allowed to continue at least one day too long outrages him. But the outrage doesn't stop with the loss of the site because our government's duplicity was just beginning. As in so many stories of the Vietnam War, the aftermath of this experience invites its own telling. And what a sordid aftermath it was: "When disaster struck Heavy Green, perhaps due to official negligence, U.S. representatives embarked on an immediate and decades long coverup. Senior Air Force officers with extensive knowledge of the Site 85 operation and loss have misrepresented the facts in official written accounts and during a lawsuit filed by a Heavy Green family" (6). How do you set such a record straight? What meaningful accounting of the losses at Site 85 can ever atone for such duplicity?

These issues suggest the next level of investigation Dr. Castle pursues in *One Day Too Long*. Knowing that his careful scholarship can do little to right the wrongs of the past, he still hopes that telling this story fully and accurately—providing his own full accounting for these missing men—might sooth some of the pain of the past and might help future military decision-makers make better decisions. And it's in his review—and pointed criticism—of our extensive national efforts at full accounting for our MIA's that Dr. Castle's book makes its greatest impact. Few authors have better credentials to thoroughly review the process; few researchers have done their homework so well. And few critics of the process have been so unsparing in their indictment of what politicians proudly tout as our "highest national priority" in restoring Vietnamese relations. Carefully documenting the "cruel misrepresentations" and outright "lies" promulgated by our government, Dr. Castle outlines a very specific indictment of our accounting process for at least the 9 MIA's of Site 85:

> Counseled by the Air Force to strictly abide by their secrecy agreements, the wives were forced into a world where they had no rights and no guardians. Dealing with women under great stress and mostly unaccustomed to questioning authority, the Air Force found especially vulnerable targets. In a military system where the families should have found protection and trust, they were instead abused and written off as part of an idea gone bad. (158-9)

The rush to judgment, the lack of conclusive evidence in the presumptive findings of these men's deaths, the contradictory stories told by senior Vietnamese and Lao officials involved with the attack on Site 85, not to mention the contradictory reports rendered by the few men successfully evacuated from the site, all come under scrutiny in Castle's probing study. In the face of so many contradictions, it's easy to see why "over the coming years the pain of not knowing the truth would continue to haunt many of the Site 85 families. Hope and anguish would clash as additional information, both accurate and false, would emerge on the fate of the eleven men left on Phou Pha Thi" (187). Sensitive to this pain, fully aware of the anguish these families faced, Dr. Castle works to remain an objective witness to events, withdrawing when necessary into the comprehensive notes following each chapter to validate this objectivity.

But after 200 pages of scrupulous testimony, Dr. Castle can't help but interpret some of the evidence for us. What, for example, of the "help" offered by the communist Lao and Vietnamese governments? How genuine is their desire to forge lasting relationships with the U.S.? How genuine is their desire to make peace?

> What of the U.S. perspective? Many Americans working in the POW-MIA accounting effort seem to forget, or choose to ignore, that Laos and Vietnam remain communist countries run by wartime veterans with considerable animosity toward the United States. There is today a great deal of pragmatism in Vietnam and Laos, and one often hears "the war is behind us." For those under thirty this is undoubtedly true. The leadership in Hanoi and Vientiane, however, are not friends of America. The United States wreaked tremendous havoc on their countries and all have relatives killed by U.S. bombing attacks. If not

> for the collapse of the Soviet Union and their forced search for economic survival, the Lao and Vietnamese probably would not have been very receptive to U.S. POW-MIA initiatives. (211)

Having visited Vietnam less than a year ago, I must confess that something rings very true in Dr. Castle's interpretation of the climate of cooperation. The economy was at the root of every conversation we had with government officials, and it certainly seems to be the motivation for their cooperation with our accounting efforts. "American naivete," says Castle, "in dealing with Lao and Vietnamese colleagues is primarily based on ignorance" (211). And it is precisely such ignorance that he hopes to erase through his book.

Using Site 85 as a test case for our POW/MIA accounting efforts, Castle concludes:

> Clearly, a review of Vietnamese efforts related to Site 85 shows a consistent pattern of stalling, distortion, manipulation, and equivocation. These delays and lies, all in Vietnam's national interest, will continue as long as the U.S. government allows this highest national priority to be controlled by politics and dishonorable people.
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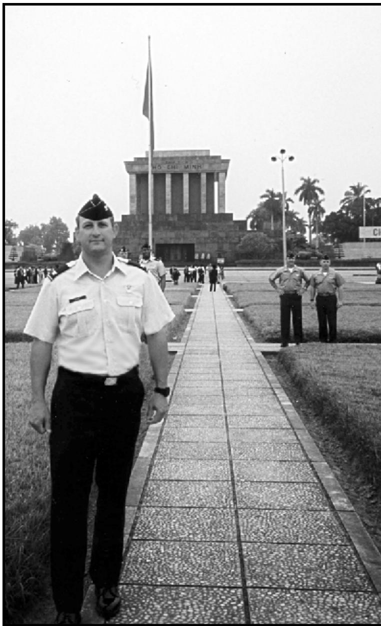
> The breach of trust continues. U.S. government officials on March 12, 1968, decided to declare all the men dead and destroy Site 85. They did so to prevent the exposure of a major American violation of the Geneva agreements which, in turn, would have caused serious political damage to the U.S. Southeast Asia war effort. Ironically, the fullest accounting for these eleven Air Force men is now being blocked by U.S. officials intent on bringing their own closure to the Vietnam war. (245)

Joseph Galloway may indeed be right, the United States may indeed need to work harder to make peace with Vietnam. But Tim Castle wonders about the disconnect between full accounting for our missing and our efforts to make peace, about the obvious duplicity of Vietnamese officials regarding the past and our promises to jointly hold hands into the future. These are complex issues, and Dr. Castle poses no easy answers.

But he does ask important questions. What of the nine airmen presumed dead at Site 85? What of a process publicly committed to full

accounting for MIA's, yet one so mired in bureaucratic and political imperatives that such accounting may be impossible. If this is a "shameful episode in U.S. history," one "which all Americans, particularly but not exclusively those who have worn the uniform or watched their loved ones go off to fight our wars, should find especially appalling," how do we truly make peace? And with whom? The Vietnamese? Our own government? With the nine-year-old VC? The questions are important, the answers evasive, the issues real. If you're interested in understanding the long road to peace in Southeast Asia, read this challenging book by Timothy N. Castle.



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