

**Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War.** By Michael J. Allen. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 448 pages. \$30.00. **Reviewed by Dr. Mark Moyar**, Professor of National Security Affairs at the US Marine Corps University and author of *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*.

The American search for prisoners of war (POWs) and missing in action (MIA) during and after the Vietnam War reached proportions never seen with any previous conflict, in terms of scope and cost. Following wars involving casualties that have dwarfed American losses in Vietnam, other nations did far less to track down their tens of thousands of missing-in-action. In addition to consuming enormous US resources, the POW/MIA search influenced American foreign policy and domestic politics for decades. Although the experiences of individual prisoners have received exhaustive treatment in histories and memoirs, the larger political, social, and cultural issues surrounding the subject have not been heavily trodden, leaving them ripe for exploration.

Michael Allen voyages into this domain in *Until the Last Man Comes Home*. Covering the POW/MIA controversy from a variety of angles, Allen devotes particular attention to the role of the wives of the missing, the influence of POW/MIA concerns on American policymaking during the war, presidential involvement in POW/MIA affairs, and the impact of the MIA issue on postwar American relations with Vietnam. Roughly half of the book covers the war years, with the remainder covering the post-war period. Based on extensive research in published and archival sources, the book contains a great amount of previously undiscovered fact. Those interested in the details of Vietnam POWs and MIAs, and POW/MIA issues more broadly, will find the book informative.

The author's analyses, however, are less impressive than his presentation of fact. As with many authors of specialized studies, Allen exaggerates the subject's import in the grand scheme of things. Rather than merely recounting the POW/MIA issue as a significant and interesting component of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, Allen claims that it was "the dominant means through which Americans recall and respond to the Vietnam War." Although imprisoned and missing forces did garner a great deal of attention from the American people during the war, the killed-in-action number has always figured larger in American minds. Any American with elementary knowledge of the Vietnam War knows the number of American fatalities, but very few Americans can recite the number of POWs and MIAs. This misconstruing of the subject's significance can be blamed to some degree on Allen's lack of interviews with veterans. During this reviewer's interviews and conversations with numerous Vietnam veterans over the past two decades, the POW/MIA issue has not approached any real level of dominance in remembrances and reactions, except for those few who were POWs. Veterans appear more focused on issues such as America's self-imposed military restrictions, media distortions of the war, draft dodgers, and the treatment of returning veterans.

At times, Allen provides serious and nuanced descriptions of individuals who championed the POW/MIA cause while supporting the war; most of them happen to be women. But he appears hostile to male MIA activists and other supporters of the war. Allen focuses inordinately on MIA activists who made the most outrageous comments and were most inclined to believe dubious stories of live MIAs still in North Vietnam. He then holds these individuals up as proof that the entire political right was stricken with fanaticism and paranoia.

In Allen's view, returned POWs and other prowar veterans who denounced antiwar protesters as enemies of the state had simply been corrupted by bitterness over their own experiences. He ignores actions by the war's opponents that provoked this animosity, instead portraying antiwar leaders as benign figures who cared deeply about the POWs and MIAs. While providing numbing detail on other issues, Allen fails to inform readers that antiwar leaders such as Dave Dellinger, Ramsey Clark, and Jane Fonda frequently declared that the North Vietnamese were treating American prisoners well, when in reality the North Vietnamese were torturing them and coercing them to make false statements. Allen also neglects to mention that antiwar protesters spit on returning veterans, branded all veterans as baby-killers, predicted enthusiastically that Ho Chi Minh would win, and denounced the United States as an evil nation.

Allen cites a small number of MIA activists who portrayed the MIAs as victims and then alleges that Vietnam veterans in general considered themselves aggrieved victims. In truth, those claiming victim status for veterans were usually opponents of the war, who used the victimization interpretation as evidence of the war's exorbitant human costs. Most veterans reject that interpretation. A Veterans Administration survey of Vietnam veterans in 1980, which Allen mysteriously ignored, found that 90 percent of combat veterans said they were glad to have served, and 69 percent said that they enjoyed their service.

Allen goes on to assert that any claims of POWs or MIAs to victim status were "unearned and immoral," because the war amounted to unprovoked American "aggression" that was intended to "subjugate" the Vietnamese people. Thus, President Ronald Reagan and others who portrayed the war as a "noble cause" were engaging in wild "fantasy." The author fails to back these assertions with evidence, a serious problem given the wealth of Communist sources showing that the war was one of North Vietnamese aggression. He makes no effort to explain away the North Vietnamese decision in 1959 to initiate an armed insurrection, the infiltration of entire North Vietnamese Army divisions into South Vietnam before American combat forces arrived, or North Vietnamese violation of Laotian and Cambodian neutrality.

Given its limitations, *Until the Last Man Comes Home* will be of use only to readers with a strong interest in POW/MIA issues and enough knowledge to separate fact from distortion. The rest of us will have to await a better book on this subject.