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A Testament to a Dying Vision of America

[Heath Hardage Lee, *The League of Wives: The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019, eBook.]

In 2023, a mere 50 years will have passed since the United States' withdrawal from South Vietnam. Following the conclusion of peace negotiations in Paris in January of 1973, the March of that year saw the end of American involvement in Vietnam's postcolonial struggle that would terminate definitely only in 1975 with the North Vietnamese—or communist—takeover of the once-U.S.-allied South. The decade of American warring in Indochina, which overlapped with the otherwise tumultuous 1960s and which, furthermore, contributed to the severe unrest within the United States, has left a lasting mark on the American collective psyche and culture. The enduring appeal of the war's memory, as well as a desire to continue to retell and recontextualise its history, is evinced not only by the steady stream of scholarship, fiction, minor publications and memoirs, but also by two relatively recent monumental releases: Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 18-hour documentary series *The*

Vietnam War (2017),¹ and historian Max Hasting's book *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (2018).²

Heath Hardage Lee's *The League of Wives*³ belongs among those of the new publications that continue to respond to the interest in the American side of the conflict, offering, in the most general terms, insight into the experience from the women's home-front perspective, one typically underrepresented in Vietnam War scholarship, fiction, and historiography alike. For this reason alone, Lee's volume of popular history is an important contribution to the writing on the war. Across twenty-two chronologically-ordered chapters, the author charts the story of the wives of U.S. servicemen, most of them pilots in the U.S. Navy, who were imprisoned by the enemy and held in captivity in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Many of these men would endure torture, as their captors tried to elicit intelligence from them, and most were denied certain POW rights accorded by the Geneva Convention, among them the opportunity to contact their families (via mail, for example) and the prerogative of international humanitarian organisations like the Red Cross to carry out inspections of the prisons and camps. By 1966, the servicemen's wives and families felt that nowhere near enough was being done by the Johnson administration to improve the conditions of captivity their husbands had to suffer and to open channels of communications between the prisoners and their loved ones. Out of frustration, the women would soon begin to organise, first in informal mailing groups, and eventually under the banner of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

As time passed and the war "went bad" in the eyes of the U.S. public, the League, due to its passionate activism and several well-publicised events and campaigns, would grow into an influential lobby that helped bring Richard Nixon into the White House in 1969. Lee's book does well in recounting the accomplishments of the women, which include not only a home-front media blitz that brought attention to their plight and eventually (with the new president in place) a change of the government policy regarding the POWs, but also foreign visits. For example, in 1971 some of the League

¹ Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, dirs., *The Vietnam War* (PBS, 2017).

² Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (London: William Collins, 2018), eBook.

³ Heath Hardage Lee, *The League of Wives: The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2019), ebook.

members travelled to Sweden, carrying 750,000 private letters demanding adherence to the Geneva Convention from Hanoi, and simultaneously aiding in brokering a deal whereby the Americans imprisoned in Indochina would be transferred and held in a neutral country until the end of the war. While in Stockholm, Phyllis Galanti, one of the leaders of the organisation, whose husband had been in North Vietnamese captivity for five years by then, managed to talk her way into the North Vietnamese embassy and talk to officials there. An alike feat had been accomplished two years earlier in Paris, during the Vietnamese-American peace talks, by the League founder Sybil Stockdale. (The POW/MIA wives would travel to the peace talks to campaign for their husbands). Stockdale and several other wives were also working with the CIA, painstakingly coding and de-coding the personal letters they were permitted to exchange with their husbands, a task that required as much intelligence and skill as it did mental fortitude in the face of the possible repercussions to the prisoners if this clandestine channel was discovered.

The early achievements of the organisation are even more impressive given the fact that action required courage and sacrifice: most of the women were “Navy wives,” or “Air Force wives,” hailing from highly conservative and patriarchal environments, often military bases or towns, where conformism toward authority, both political and military, was entrenched, and public action by women controversial and discouraged. While the American Vietnam War-era POWs are widely known and have long been celebrated as “heroes,” it is to Lee’s credit to bring to the mainstream once again the story of the women who fought so zealously, and tirelessly, for their husband’s lives. The author’s sensitivity to the particular obstacles faced by married women in that position—for example, the need to find adequate care for their children when they met with politicians in Washington or flew to Europe to talk to the North Vietnamese—is also a humanising factor that throws a sharper light on the women’s experience of the conflict.

Altogether, Lee finds the League’s greatest achievement in the publicity they managed to garner. John McCain and other ex-POWs are quoted in the book praising the actions of the League, since their wellbeing while in captivity was completely neglected under the Johnson administration’s “keep quiet” policy; the conditions only improved following the wives’

public outcry that went against the government's strict guidelines not to reveal to the public any particulars of the POWs' situation. Some of the men would have died, Lee writes, had it been not for the pressure exerted on the captors by the new international awareness of the human rights' violations happening to Americans in the prisons and camps, which resulted in their better treatment. "Without the National League," Lee writes in conclusion, "and the wives' relentless lobbying of [politicians] [...], the women's covert work, their savvy media campaign all across the globe, and their own personal sacrifices, the entire prisoner and missing scenario might have been ignored by a largely oblivious American nation and the world."⁴

While this interpretation of the women's impact on their husbands' fate remains convincing, the book suffers from several major failings that ultimately undermine its potential. For one thing, *The League of Wives* is more a panegyric than "serious" nonfiction that would engage in, or encourage in the reader, commentary and critical interpretation. Lee seems determined to portray the POW/MIA wives as absolutely successful in their quest, toppling stubborn, unpatriotic politicians and wretched communists so that their husbands are given proper care—but, while the women's impact on publicising the issue is undeniable, one might wonder whether a more accurate assessment of their activism is in order. One small example is illustrative of the book's overall rhetorical strategy: on the occasion of the Stockholm visit, Lee writes that Galanti's and the others' "truckload" of letters was the women's weapon against the North Vietnamese, and that, in this case, "the pen would prove mightier than the sword."⁵ However, the deal with Sweden to transfer the American prisoners there never came to fruition (earning the then prime minister Olof Palme the everlasting fire of the POW/MIA wives as well as of Lee herself). Although Galanti made it to the North Vietnamese embassy, the representatives she spoke to dismissed the League's requests and pleas. This was, by and large, the effect of the foreign visit. So, what did the might of the pen accomplish?

Summing up the story, Lee states that "*some historians* claim that the Nixon government used the women for its own ends,"⁶ which she counters

⁴ Ibid., epilogue.

⁵ Ibid., chapter 15.

⁶ Ibid., epilogue. Emphasis added.

with quotations from the League wives themselves saying otherwise. But the author fails to engage this interpretation of events with either argumentation or alternative. The names of those “some historians” are not even disclosed in a footnote so that the reader might seek them out. However, despite Lee’s claim, and even if the relationship between the League and Nixon was symbiotic, it is politically naïve to claim that the administration adopted the POW/MIA as its pet issue out of the goodness of the president’s heart or simply the administration’s sense of responsibility toward the captured men. Rather, the matter was a boon to Nixon in a number of ways: in the mood of the late 1960s, his concern helped convince voters that he would end the war soon and “with honor”; the POW/MIA lobby provided considerable public support in terms of both a backing for political issues and supporter numbers; and the subject of the prisoners and the unaccounted-for could be used to exert pressure on North Vietnam during the negotiations in Paris. Finally, because the United States, a military empire, had by the end of the conflict been sorely lacking in heroic figures that would hold mass appeal, especially internationally, when the POWs were eventually freed in 1973, their arrival in the United States presented a perfect photo opportunity and publicity stunt for the administration. And just as the topic of the POWs was turned into the most pressing matter regarding the Vietnamese-American relations in Paris, so, at home, the “administration, having inherited an unpopular and frustrating war, decided that recovering American prisoners of war was one policy goal that might sustain public sympathy and support.”⁷ Soon, the White House officials “began to speak as though the North Vietnamese had kidnapped four hundred Americans and the United States had gone to war to retrieve them.”⁸ The activism of the POW/MIA wives, though admirable, succeeded insofar as making the conditions of captivity in North Vietnam known—but in itself, it would not necessarily bring the men back were it not for the fact that the issue proved calculatedly beneficial to Nixon.

⁷ Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 117. See also: H. Bruce Franklin, “Missing in Action in the Twenty-First Century,” in: *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 317–322.

⁸ Jonathan Schell, quoted in: Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, p. 117.

Another problem with *The League of Wives* is its unacknowledged, but rather blatant, right-wing bias. Jerry Lembcke's seminal study *The Spitting Image* not only charts in some detail the machinations of Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Henry Kissinger in deliberately raising the profile of the POW/MIA for the reasons just enumerated, but it also shows how the same forces worked to demonise the anti-war movement within the U.S. so as to direct the "silent majority's" negative emotions centred around the war away from the White House and toward the supposedly treacherous anti-war movement instead.⁹ (Lembcke is almost certainly among the "some historians.") In *The League of Wives*, Stockdale, Galanti, and others find the idea of working with the anti-war movement distasteful, especially since representatives of its radical communist branches travelled to Hanoi and were able to facilitate communication with the POWs via letters, or sometimes even assisted in freeing American prisoners before 1973. The women were deeply unhappy that mail could be carried by communists and not by channels approved by them—although it is hardly surprising that, in the midst of war, North Vietnam would deal with American communists and anti-war protesters rather than ardent anti-communists—and they were *against* "early releases" of POWs as the U.S. military "Code of Conduct forbids military men to accept parole and come home early" (chapter 9). This stance, first, reveals something of the deeply indoctrinated radical pro-militarism, patriotism, and conservatism of the League wives, at least before a couple of years into the Nixon presidency, and the disillusionment it would eventually bring to some in the organisation, and, second, helps explain why the antiwar movement was so passionately abhorred, even when it actually worked to help the prisoners. But the disdain for the protesters is thinly veiled in Lee's writing, too: "The motives of the most radical antiwar groups, who wanted to stop the war at any cost, were mixed at best, self-serving at worst" (chapter 11); "overtly political, [the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in Vietnam, founded by several left-wing groups] was the opposite of the growing League movement, which was staunchly humanitarian and mostly pro-Nixon" (chapter 12).

⁹ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 94–100.

Lee never strays beyond the source material prescribed by her conservative bias, which includes memoirs written by the ex-POWs and League members, and this is perhaps why she omits entirely the fallout of the prisoner issue: namely, the so-called POW/MIA conspiracy theory, according to which some U.S. servicemen were left behind in Indochinese prisons after 1975, and continued to be tortured by their evil captors, with the full but top-secret knowledge of the American government. The absence is all the more striking since the “theory” remains alive and well in the minds of many, perhaps, even the majority of Americans, which makes it the most lasting legacy of the POW/MIA matter, far outliving the significance of the actual captivity and release. This “theory” has been decisively debunked, most notably by historian H. Bruce Franklin,¹⁰ but that no mention of it appears in *The League of Wives* can feasibly be explained as Lee’s reluctance to alienate portions of the book’s projected target-audience who, I assume, continue to believe in its veracity. Alternatively, dabbling in the subject would perhaps raise too many uncomfortable questions, given that some of the most famous and outspoken proponents of the theory—Ross Perot, Bo Gritz, splinters of the League itself—are simultaneously the heroes of Lee’s book. This problem is not without importance: throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the POW/MIA myth was used by subsequent U.S. governments to thwart any efforts on the part of Vietnam to redevelop after the war’s cataclysmic destruction, as discussed exhaustively in Edwin Martini’s study of the post-1975 Vietnamese-American relations.¹¹ (The idea that Vietnam was holding on to American soldiers or their remains was raised when the U.S. tried to block Vietnam’s entry into the United Nations, when it refused war-relief aid, or when it effectively prohibited the international community and the World Bank from helping the country out financially or otherwise.)

Finally, the book’s perhaps greatest failing is its complete, utter myopic ethnocentrism. When, on one occasion, they attend the Paris peace talks and attempt to lobby for their husbands among foreign diplomats, the

¹⁰ H. Bruce Franklin, *MIA, or Mythmaking in America: How and Why Belief in Live POWs Has Possessed a Nation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993). See also: Susan Katz Keating, *Prisoners of Hope: Exploiting the POW/MIA Myth in America* (New York: Random House, 1994).

¹¹ Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press). See also: Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), eBook, chapter 15.

League members are shown as dismayed to find out that many people they approach are indifferent to their cause: “Did you bring the wives of the Vietnamese men missing in action with you?” asks one man, with “attitude,” “I didn’t come to this conference to talk to the likes of you” (chapter 15). The book demands that the reader views this statement as offensive and callous, and indeed this is the overall tone of the book, as it treats the American POWs as virtually the only victims of the war worthy of attention and compassion. Anything that strays ideologically outside of the narrow confines of American-loving conservatism is seen, and described, as outrageous and objectionable: the politics of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, the left-leaning cultural milieu of 1960s Parisian streets, and so forth.

Against the 591 Americans freed in 1973 and the 2,646 soldiers officially unaccounted for—including those classified as both MIA and KIA/BNR (killed in action/body not recovered)—by the end of the war the Vietnamese on both sides listed some 300,000 missing fighters. Against over 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam, fatalities resulting from the American war in both South and North Vietnam—victims of the United States, the South Vietnamese government, North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong—numbered some 2 million people among civilians alone (and that is still excluding American-caused deaths in Cambodia and Laos).¹² But even ignoring these somewhat sobering statistics, a problem with the perspective assumed in *The League of Wives* remains: the American prisoners, often bomber pilots, were directly involved in the implementation of the genocidal policy of the United States in Indochina. For all the complaints of the League wives about the North Vietnamese disregard for the Geneva Convention, the book fails so much as to mention the Vietnamese victims of the illegal and wildly brutal American anti-independence war. And, even if one could use the argument that these men were “only following orders,” the orders in themselves often constituted a war crime, or came close—and these pilots were the ones to drop the bombs. Expecting particular compassion from readers, therefore, might seem a little excessive.

There is a certain circularity to the relationship between the POWs’ involvement in U.S. strategy in the war and their eventual political and

¹² Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), eBook, introduction.

cultural function. Much could be written about the several air operations that ran throughout the period of American involvement and killed countless people in the Vietnamese countryside and destroyed the landscape, but let us just focus on one. In 1972, despite the seemingly victorious bargaining chip presented to the American negotiators in Paris by the POW/MIA issue, and following a period of the bombing of North Vietnam that was heavier than the infamous Operation Rolling Thunder that ran between 1965 and 1968, the communists broke off the talks and refused to return to the table. To force them to come back, Nixon ordered a “maximum effort” bombing campaign over North Vietnam that would last twelve days and target schools, hospitals, and residential areas. Radio in Hanoi claimed at the time that

there had been more than five hundred B-52 attacks against the [...] capital. [...] The United States had razed [...] economic, social, educational and cultural establishments in 353 places. Some areas [...] were hit as many as ten times.

The report claimed that 1,318 people were killed and 1,261 wounded [...]. The workers’ quarter of An Duong was said to have been obliterated on December 21 by six hundred bombs dropped by B-52s. The bombs cut a swath more than half a mile long and half a mile wide in this section, destroying two hundred homes and schools, day nurseries, kindergartens, food shops and grocery stores. [...] “Kham Thien Street with nearly thirty thousand inhabitants, most of them working people, was attacked on December 26 by thirty B-52 bombers.” The investigation said that 534 houses were destroyed, 1,200 others damaged and “dozens of food shops, pagodas, temples, kindergartens, reading rooms and libraries ravaged.”¹³

Photographs of Hanoi following the “Christmas bombing” of 1972 testify today to the scale of destruction. However, even though the attacks did “persuade” the communist negotiators to sit down with the Americans again and the peace accords were signed in January 1973, this was the extent that the Hanoi campaign truly achieved: the terms of the peace agreement had actually been worked out months before, and in the end answered to all of Hanoi’s demands. The United States lost the war, and

¹³ Gloria Emerson, *Winners & Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 42.

the “devastation [caused by the Christmas bombing had] changed nothing of diplomatic significance,” having been planned as little more than a “show of strength.”¹⁴ This was the great length the Nixon administration was willing to go to for the sake of its publicity; as the operation attracted severe criticism from abroad for its brutality, it became clear that it had been conducted solely for the benefit of the American audience, so that it would seem that it was the military might of the United States that definitely ended, and won, the Vietnam War.¹⁵ The POWs were another prong of this strategy. As Saigon correspondent Gloria Emerson writes: “A majority of Americans, perhaps because the Paris Peace Agreement provided for the return of our prisoners of war, thought that President Nixon had achieved ‘peace with honor’ and that the bombing of North Vietnam had done it.”¹⁶

None of this context, or consideration of the wider impact of the League and of the POW/MIA issue, is covered in Lee’s book. In the end, *The League of Wives* is an unchallenging book of flimsy historiography, further marred by bias and intellectual conformity. It is also a wasted opportunity, since, as already noted, both the topic and the women protagonists deserve recognition—but certainly a more contextualised, more nuanced historical account, and engagement with some potentially provocative questions raised by the POW/MIA spectacle, would make for a more interesting story about the role emotion could, and perhaps should, play in politics. As it is, *The League of Wives* is a testament to an imploding conservative and narcissistic America—not a story for a new world whose birth, as of this writing, we are very likely witnessing.

¹⁴Hastings, *Vietnam*, chapter 25.1.

¹⁵Ibid.; Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, chapter 13.

¹⁶Emerson, *Winners & Losers*, p. 43.

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This article is a review of *The League of Wives: The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home* (2019) by Heath Hardage Lee. The book presents a popular history of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, an organisation that advocated for the rights of American prisoners of war captured by North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Vietnam War, prisoners of war, Richard Nixon, the United States, POW/MIA

Słowa kluczowe: Wojna wietnamska, więźniowie wojenni, Richard Nixon, Stany Zjednoczone, jeniec wojenny/zaginiony w akcji