

It's Operation Censor in Draft POW Report

THE SPECIAL Senate committee on unaccounted-for Vietnam POWs, having prepared a draft of its final report, is in the throes of a bitter internal protest by dissenters on the panel. The dissenters see in the draft a deliberate attempt to omit and water down evidence of how many men were left behind and how long some may have lived in captivity and whether any may still be alive today. Information obtained by this reporter bears out the dissenters.

A final version of the report is expected to be released next Tuesday. So some changes may be made — though not likely any fundamental revision. I shall write two columns this week, and more in ensuing days, about how key evidence was suppressed. The suppressed information would stand in the way of the agenda of the committee majority, led by Chairman John Kerry, whose objective is to peremptorily close the books on the POW issue as a way to normalize relations with Vietnam.

The censoring operation appears to have been led by Kerry's staff and was accomplished in several ways. One was by omitting key chunks of information. Another method was to see that pivotal portions were written by staffers hand-picked by Kerry and his allies on the committee.

One such staffer was Sedgwick Tourison Jr., a former Pentagon intelligence interrogator in Indochina who was assigned the chapter dealing with the core issue of numbers — how many men were left behind and whether any could be alive today. Tourison, however, would appear to have a serious conflict of interest, since he made up his mind on the issue a long time ago.

In "Talking With Victor Charlie," a book he wrote that was published two years ago, he said, describing his conclusions upon departing his intelligence job in 1968: "I was satisfied that there were no live United States POWs in Southeast Asia and that there hadn't been any since Operation Homecoming [the return of 591 men after the signing of the peace accord] in early 1973."

In short, Tourison said flatly in that book, repeating it several times, that no men had ever been left behind. In a phone interview yesterday, he declined to say whether, in light of the new testimony and newly declassified documents, he has since changed his mind. But the conversation — in

which he contended the whole MIA issue was a hoax perpetrated through a disinformation campaign by Hanoi's "state security apparatus" — indicated that he has not.

The final report, according to my sources, will not parrot all of Tourison's views, primarily because the committee's own public hearings established the opposite. For example, former Defense Secretaries Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson and James Schlesinger all testified that men had indeed been

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left behind in 1973. Nonetheless, though the Senate committee was compelled to give credence to this testimony, its report significantly dilutes and de-emphasizes much of the detailed intelligence reports, photos, radio intercepts, sightings and other evidence of unaccounted-for men that came into the committee's hands. And this dilution was ensured by giving the section to Tourison.

On another central issue — whether the Vietnamese ever offered to return live prisoners in exchange for money — the draft report did an aston-

ishing thing. It said: "The committee found no credible evidence of any such offer being made."

This itself is an incredible statement, because the committee majority had refused to bring in for testimony a central witness — a former Secret Service agent who was assigned to the White House in 1981. This man John Syphrit, reportedly told committee investigators that he overheard a conversation involving President Ronald Reagan, Vice-President George Bush, CIA chief William Casey and national security adviser Richard Allen. The conversation was said to be about an offer by Hanoi to turn over 57 POWs if Washington would provide the \$4.5 billion in development aid that had been promised in 1973 by then national security adviser Henry Kissinger. The White House rejected the offer, for reasons as yet unknown.

Syphrit, who still works for the Treasury Department, though not in the Secret Service, said he feared retaliation and therefore would not testify for the record unless he were subpoenaed. So the committee scheduled a vote. A Kerry ally, Sen. John McCain, who though a former POW himself has oddly scorned all evidence of men left behind, lobbied hard with committee members against subpoenaing the former Secret Service man. The White House and Treasury Department also lobbied. They succeeded. The vote was 7-4 against.

The draft report twists the facts outrageously on this subject. It says, for instance, that the committee had "deposed participants in the alleged meeting" that Syphrit was witness to. This is a flat-out untruth. Only one of the four participants was deposed. Neither Reagan nor Bush was ever questioned. Casey is dead. Allen did come in to testify in a closed session and confirmed the offer of live prisoners. However, through some miraculous process, he wrote back to the committee some time later and said he had been confused and wished to recant.

At the start of their work in 1991, John Kerry, John McCain and their allies on the committee said that they would turn over every last stone to get at the truth. A year and a half later, nearly all the stones are still in place. They've blown a great opportunity to open the doors on our Vietnam history and let in the cleansing winds.

More tomorrow on what they did instead.