



Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War

By Michael J. Allen

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Fewer Americans were captured or missing during the Vietnam War than in any previous major military conflict in U.S. history. Yet despite their small numbers, American POWs inspired an outpouring of concern that slowly eroded support for the war. Michael J. Allen reveals how wartime loss transformed U.S. politics well before, and long after, the war's official end.

Throughout the war's last years and in the decades since, Allen argues, the effort to recover lost warriors was as much a means to establish responsibility for their loss as it was a search for answers about their fate. Though millions of Americans and Vietnamese took part in that effort, POW and MIA families and activists dominated it. Insisting that the war was not over "until the last man comes home," this small, determined group turned the unprecedented accounting effort against those they blamed for their suffering. Allen demonstrates that POW/MIA activism prolonged the hostility between the United States and Vietnam even as the search for the missing became the basis for closer ties between the two countries in the 1990s. Equally important, he explains, POW/MIA families' disdain for the antiwar left and contempt for federal authority fueled the conservative ascendancy after 1968. Mixing political, cultural, and diplomatic history, *Until the Last Man Comes Home* presents the full and lasting impact of the Vietnam War in ways that are both familiar and surprising.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #879285 in Books
- Brand: Brand: The University of North Carolina Press
- Published on: 2009-09-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.32" h x 6.42" w x 9.48" l, 1.74 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 448 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Allen, an assistant professor of history at Northwestern, presents a perceptive analysis of the history of the Vietnam War POW/MIA issue: paradoxically, the most extensive study ever attempted, despite the startling fact that the number of those missing in action is comparatively small (about 1,800, compared with 8,000 in Korea). In an ambitious book, Allen meticulously traces the history of the movement to account for the missing, concentrating on the group that became the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. He captures the sense of bitterness and betrayal that motivated the families and shows how the league morphed from a wives-led lobbying effort into a political phenomenon that has had a significant impact on the body politic through six presidential administrations, from Nixon to George W. Bush. Allen also makes a convincing case that the MIA issue was an important factor in the political rise of Ronald Reagan, which marked the start of nearly three decades of Republican rule. Allen lapses into needless academic jargon on occasion, but otherwise writes clearly and cogently in this valuable look at what he accurately calls a strange story. 28 illus. (*Sept. 18*)

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Review

A valuable, even unique, contribution to the field. . . . Skillfully written, very well researched, and wonderfully documented and presents a fair and balanced view of the issues. . . . Appropriate for all who seek to understand the Vietnam War in a fuller context.--*Library Journal*

This complex book . . . develops a critical history of the National League of Families of POWs and MIAs. . . . Highly recommended.--*Choice*

Allen does an excellent job chronicling the history of the Vietnam War POW/MIA movement. . . . [A] valuable look at what he accurately calls a 'strange' story.--*Vietnam Veterans of America Magazine*

Wonderfully insightful and thoughtful. . . . By unraveling and revealing the various strands of memory created since the late 1960s by the U.S. government, POW/MIA activists, special-interest groups, political parties, and the Vietnamese, Allen clearly establishes his main theme.--*Proceedings*

Beautifully written and exhaustively researched, the book seamlessly weaves together diplomatic, political, and cultural history.--*The Sixties*

Michael J. Allen . . . has completely changed the way we should think about the politics surrounding

America's prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action (POW/MIA) from the Vietnam conflict. . . . Based on extensive research and superbly written, Allen's book will become the standard on the cultural politics of the POW/MIA issue.--*Journal of American History*

Present[s] an enormously complex phenomenon in terms accessible to the lay reader. . . . Provide[s] a richly detailed account that will be of immense value to other scholars interested in the subject. . . . Truly insightful analysis . . . an unqualified success.--*Journal of the Review of Politics*

Indispensable reading to anyone interested in the political and cultural history of the Vietnam War. . . . A fascinating case study.--*The Sixties*

Allen's monograph gives us a companion piece for the many studies we already have of 1960s-era antiwar organizations. His rooting of early twenty-first-century political and ideological themes in the loss of the war in Vietnam assures his book a place of prominence on the reading lists of academic and public intellectuals and students at all levels.--*American Historical Review*

[An] absorbing addition to the immense literature on the [Vietnam] war.--*History News Network*

A must-read for historians, sociologists, and policy makers interested in American political culture today....His rooting of early twenty-first-century political and ideological themes in the loss of the war in Vietnam assures his book a place of prominence on the reading lists of academic and public intellectuals and students at all levels." --*The American Historical Review*

Presents the full and lasting impact of the Vietnam War in ways that are both familiar and surprising.--*McCormick Messenger*

A perceptive analysis of the history of the Vietnam War POW/MIA issue. . . . Valuable.--*Publishers Weekly*

Allen's extremely well researched book outlines previous measures nations have taken to exchange POW's and bury the dead.--*Newsvine*

Works out the politics of the POWs in staggering depth.--Rick Perlstein, *The Nation*

Michael J. Allen has written the best book to date on the impact of the Vietnam War POW/MIA issue on American diplomacy, domestic politics, and national culture.--*Diplomatic History*

Allen masterfully traces the development of the POW/MIA movement, and possesses keen insight concerning the motives and behaviors of those who sought to make the issue theirs. . . . A very important contribution to POW/MIA studies.--*Journal of Military History*

Review

Michael Allen's rich and beautifully written book becomes the new starting point for understanding Vietnam era POW/MIA politics and their centrality to American history over the last four decades. It is a splendid achievement and will serve as a model for the study of the cultural politics of war and memory in the twentieth century.--Mark Bradley, The University of Chicago

A fascinating examination of a long and painful chapter of American history.--General (Ret.) Wesley K. Clark

Michael Allen offers a compelling and nuanced analysis of a difficult topic, combining archival rigor with a true sensitivity to the tangled emotions of Americans in the years following the nation's loss in Vietnam.--Beth Bailey, author of *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force*

Allen's first-rate analysis deals with an extremely important and much misunderstood and oversimplified subject, and it does so with authority, originality, subtlety, and nuance. It will become required reading for all students of the Vietnam War, changing the way in which the POW and MIA controversies are understood and interpreted.--Robert McMahon, Ohio State University

Users Review

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