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MIA, or Mythmaking in America

H. Bruce Franklin

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Almost two decades after the Vietnam War, most Americans remain convinced that U.S. prisoners are still being held captive in Southeast Asia, and many even accuse the government of concealing their existence. But as H. Bruce Franklin demonstrates in his startling investigation, there is no plausible basis for the belief in live POWs. Through scrupulous research, he shows for the first time how this illusion was fabricated and then converted into a powerful myth. Franklin reveals that in 1969 the Nixon administration, aided by militant pro-war forces, manufactured the POW/MIA issue to deflect attention from American atrocities in Vietnam, to undermine the burgeoning anti-war movement, and to stymie the Paris peace talks, resulting in the prolongation of the Vietnam War for another four years. Successive administrations, in an effort to mobilize public support for their continued economic and political warfare against Vietnam, asserted the possibility of live POWs at great emotional cost to both family members of the missing and countless Americans distressed about the fate of those supposedly left behind in Indochina. Born of political expediency, the POW/MIA issue was transformed in the 1980s into a potent myth. American culture was transfigured as movies and novels designed to reimage the Vietnam War turned the imagined post-war POWs into crucial symbols of betrayed American manhood and honor. Finally the myth began to turn against its creators when many Americans became convinced that the government itself was conspiring to betray the missing men. As he traces the evolution of the POW/MIA myth, Franklin not only exposes it as an elaborate hoax at the highest levels of government, butalso explains why the myth has penetrated to the heart of American life. By confronting the true tragedy of the missing in Vietnam, Franklin helps us to understand how to heal the terrible psychological and spiritual wounds of the Vietnam War.

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