



## *What Remains: Bringing America's Missing Home from the Vietnam War*

by Sarah E. Wagner.

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Decades after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the locating, repatriating, and identifying of some sixteen hundred American service members killed in action remain central to the United States' postwar self-reckoning. In *What Remains*, her new study of the subject, anthropologist Sarah Wagner<sup>1</sup> (George Washington Univ.) examines the difficulty of memorializing the dead in the absence of a body, the state's obligations to fighters killed in war, and the contentious politics around the accounting effort. Her discerning analysis of the use of forensic science to identify repatriated remains is the book's signal contribution to the scholarship on its subject. Forensic science.

has given families of the unaccounted for a new language of remembrance, one that seeks to address the ambiguities of unknown fates and unreturned remains through the promise of accuracy, calculability, and efficiency. In this novel lexicon of individuated loss and sacrifice, the science of MIA [missing in action] accounting has also affected how this country remembers its war dead, raising expectations for what is possible and what is necessary in honoring those who died fighting on its behalf... [Forensic science] gave rise to new rituals, creating "new sacred things" in the wake of violent rupture. (6)

It has also transformed how families and the state think and talk about Vietnam War MIAs.

Wagner's impressive research for *What Remains* includes interviews with families of missing Americans as well as independent inquiry into many diverse sources, not to mention her participation in a remains-recovery mission in Vietnam in 2012. She is well aware of the intrinsic difficulties of achieving the "fullest possible accounting" while remaining sensitive to the desire for something tangible to mourn and memorialize. The new sacred things amount to an

ethos of exceptional care ... for the physical remains of the missing through scientific means—recovering, repatriating, identifying, and returning them to their families and their communities of mourning, [an] implied social contract [whereby] the state—more specifically its government—is responsible for locating, naming and returning his or her remains, and ... levies its authority and resources to carry out the obligation of care. (12, 9, 35)

The operation of this contract is dramatized by the story of 1st Lt. Michael Blassie, whose remains were interred in the Tomb of the Unknown at Arlington National Cemetery in 1984, only to be exhumed in 1998 when advances in forensic science made it possible to identify them. This achievement seemed to promise that the US government might be able to uphold its end of the contract to the extent that there would be, as Secretary of Defense William Cohen put it, "no other unknowns in any war" (82). But such expectations underestimated the challenge of identifying,

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1. Her earlier work includes *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2008).

for instance, tiny bone fragments degraded by decades of acidic soil and ignored the obvious impossibility of recovering remains of service personnel lost at sea or simply obliterated by high explosives. Failure to meet the unrealistic expectations raised in the Blassie case reinforced the longstanding suspicion that the US government was forsaking the missing and their families.

Wagner skillfully evokes the anguish these developments inflicted on families yearning for the closure offered by tangible remains they could bury at home and publicly mourn and memorialize. Her interviews put a human face on what can seem to be little more than a resentment-fueled refighting of decades-old battles. As she rightly observes, “missing service members belong to grieving families and communities just as much, if not more, than to a ‘grateful’ nation” (181). But this is an area where the author could have been more critical. One interviewee said “I was thrilled if one bone chip came home; I knew it was my brother, I finally knew his fate, and he was coming home” (171); many others spoke of their loved one as being “finally at rest.” While undoubtedly sincere, such statements are so uniform in tone and content as to feel like performance art. Virtually every MIA family maintains closure is impossible until a body is identified and that it is the US government’s duty to ensure it happens.

Closure is a complicated thing and its rote invocation by families of the missing rings hollow. In addition, it can be something we do for ourselves rather than something others do for us. That is, it does not *require* physical remains. Wagner astutely points out that “When decades have since passed and there is no resolution in sight, closure doesn’t fit. MIA families already know well the phrase’s limits” (182). Nevertheless, it would be fascinating to learn more about the origins of the cultural scripting at work here.

Also notable is the lingering sense among families that the fate of a loved one remains in doubt until an identified body is returned to the United States (see above: “I finally knew his fate”). But the *fates* of the missing are not, in fact, in doubt; they are all dead. Wagner herself tacitly reinforces this impression when she asks, “On a more abstract level, how does one remember a person who is neither definitively dead nor positively alive?” (11). A more perceptive analysis is needed here to determine whether closure might hinge on something other than physical remains. That said, Wagner’s focus on the language of forensic science helps clarify the link between the identified body and the certainty sought by families of the missing. Forensic science, with “its capacity to recognize the sacred and to enable rituals of remembrance and mourning” (6), represents a novel way of conceptualizing the issue of Americans missing in Vietnam.

Sarah Wagner makes a persuasive case for the key role of forensic science in resolving certain ambiguities and animosities of the Vietnam War. Restoring identified war dead to their families (and nation) highlights the state’s obligation to provide exceptional care even decades after the war. In the process, new narratives about the Vietnam War have become possible, narratives that reestablish the imagined community frayed by the dissension and turmoil of a long and unpopular war.