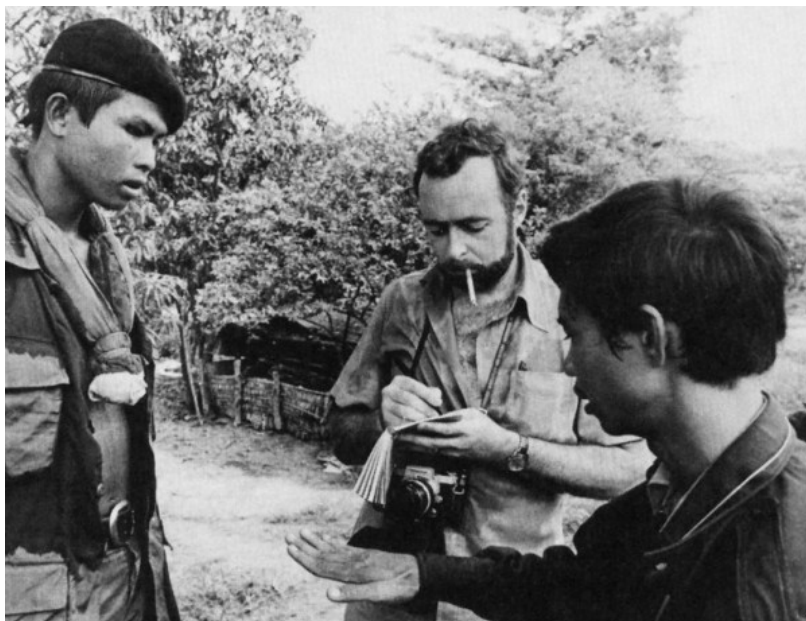


The Unz Review: An Alternative Media Selection

A Collection of Interesting, Important, and Controversial Perspectives Largely Excluded from the American Mainstream Media

American Pravda: The Legacy of Sydney Schanberg

RON UNZ • JULY 13, 2016 • 3,500 WORDS • 153 COMMENTS



Sydney H. Schanberg, center, in Cambodia, August 1973

The death on Saturday of Sydney Schanberg at age 82 should sadden us not only for the loss of one of our most renowned journalists but also for what his story reveals about the nature of our national media.

Syd had [made his career](#) at the *New York Times* for 26 years, winning a Pulitzer Prize, two George Polk Memorial awards, and numerous other honors. His passing received the notice it deserved, with the world's most prestigious broadsheet devoting [nearly a full page](#) of its Sunday edition to his obituary, a singular honor that in this degraded era is more typically reserved for leading pop stars or sports figures. Several photos were included of [his Cambodia reporting](#), which had become the basis for the Oscar-winning film *The Killing Fields*, one of Hollywood's most memorable accounts [of our disastrous Indo-Chinese War](#).

But for all the 1,300 words and numerous images charting his long and illustrious journalistic history, [not even a single mention was made of the biggest story of his career](#), which has seemingly vanished down the memory hole without trace. And therein lies a tale.

Could a news story ever be “too big” for the media to cover? Every journalist is always seeking a major expose, a piece that not merely reaches the transitory

front pages but also might win a journalistic prize or even change the history books. Stories such as these appear rarely but can make a reporter's career, and it is difficult to imagine a writer turning one down, or an editor rejecting it.

But **what if the story is so big that** it actually reveals dangerous truths about the real nature of the American media, portrays too many powerful people in a very negative light, and perhaps leads to a widespread loss of faith in our major news media? If readers were to see a story like that, they might naturally begin to wonder "why hadn't we ever been told?" or even "what else might be out there?"

Towards the end of the 2008 presidential campaign, while John McCain battled Barack Obama for the White House, I clicked an intriguing link on a small website and discovered Syd's **remarkable expose**, one which had been passed over or rejected by every major media outlet in the country, his enormous personal reputation notwithstanding.

The basic outline of events he described was a simple one. During the Paris Peace Talks that ended the Vietnam War, the U.S. government had committed to pay its Hanoi adversaries \$3.25 billion in war reparations, and in exchange would receive back the American POWs held by the Vietnamese. The agreement was signed and the war officially ended, but **the Vietnamese, suspecting a possible financial double-cross, kept back many hundreds of the imprisoned Americans until they received the promised payment.**

For domestic political reasons, the Nixon Administration had characterized the billions of dollars pledged as "humanitarian assistance" and Congress balked at appropriating such a large sum for a hated Communist regime. **Desperate for "peace with honor" and already suffering under the growing Watergate Scandal, Nixon and his aides could not admit that many hundreds of the POWs remained in enemy hands,** and so declared them all returned, probably hoping to quietly arrange a trade of money for prisoners once the dust had settled. Similarly, Hanoi's leaders falsely claimed that all the captives had been released, while they waited for their money to be paid. As a result, **the two governments had jointly created a Big Lie, one which has largely maintained itself right down to the present day.**

In the troubled aftermath of America's military defeat and the Nixon resignation, our entire country sought to forget Vietnam, and neither elected officials nor journalists were eager to revisit the issue, let alone investigate one of the war's dirtiest secrets. The Vietnamese continued to hold their American prisoners for most of the next twenty years, periodically making attempts to negotiate their release in exchange for the money they were still owed, but never found a American leader daring enough to take such a bold step. The Big Lie had grown just too enormous to be overturned.

Over the years, rumors surrounding the remaining POWs became widespread in veterans' circles, and eventually these stories inspired a series of blockbuster

Hollywood movies such as *Rambo*, *Missing in Action*, and *Uncommon Valor*, whose plots were all naturally dismissed or ridiculed as “rightwing conspiracy theories” by our elite media pundits. But the stories were all true, and even as American filmgoers watched Sylvester Stallone heroically free desperate American servicemen from Vietnamese prisons, the real-life American POWs were still being held under much those same horrible conditions, with no American leader willing to take the enormous political risk of attempting either to rescue or ransom them. Over the years, many of the POWs had died from ill-treatment, and the return of the miserable survivors after their secret captivity would unleash a firestorm of popular anger, surely destroying the many powerful individuals who had long known of their abandonment.

Eventually, America’s bipartisan political leadership sought to reestablish diplomatic relations with Hanoi and finally put the Vietnam War behind the country, but this important policy goal was obstructed by the residual political pressure from the resolute POW families. So a Senate Select Committee on the POWs was established in order to declare them non-existent once and for all. **Sen. John McCain**, a very high profile former POW himself, led the cover-up, perhaps because the very dubious nature of his own true war record left him eager to trade secrecy for secrecy. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, our media declared that the abandoned POWs had never existed and closed the books on the long, lingering controversy.

As it happens, not long after the committee issued its final report and shut down, a stunning document was unearthed in the newly-opened Kremlin archives. In the transcript of a Hanoi Politburo meeting, the Communist leadership discussed the true number of POWs they then held and made their decision to keep half of them back to ensure that America paid the billions of dollars it had promised. Former National Security Advisors Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger both stated on national television that the document appeared genuine and it seemed undeniable that American POWs had indeed been left behind. Although the national media devoted a couple of days of major coverage to this uncomfortable revelation, it then reported denials from both the U.S. and Vietnamese governments, and quickly dropped the story, returning to the official narrative: There were no abandoned POWs and never had been.

As I reviewed Syd’s massively-documented 8,000 word exposition, and confirmed for myself that the bylined Sydney Schanberg was indeed *the* Sydney Schanberg, I experienced a growing sense of unreality. I was reading what might rank as **“the story of the century,”** a scandal vastly greater and more gripping than the sordid political abuses of Watergate or Iran-Contra, a tale of national treachery suppressed for forty years by our government and our media, but now broken by one of America’s most distinguished journalists. The gravest possible charges were being levied against Sen. John McCain, the Republican nominee, coming right at the height of his presidential campaign. And not one word of

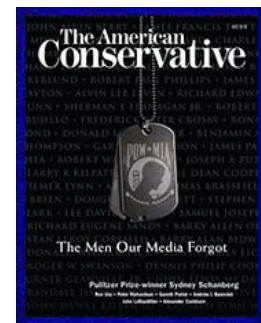
this was being mentioned in any of our mainstream media outlets, while almost all of the thousands of political websites, large and small alike, remained just as silent. From that day forward, I have never looked upon our national media with the same eye.

Everyone to whom I showed the article was just as shocked as myself, except for one or two individuals with a strong Vietnam War background, who privately confirmed that it was all probably true.

The election came and went with McCain's defeat, and the incoming Obama Administration began coping with the intensifying financial crisis, but I still couldn't put Syd's remarkable article out of my mind, nor the deafening silence it had received. Perhaps, I thought to myself, the piece had been ignored because it appeared on a small website with few readers, and the unprepossessing circumstances of its release had raised serious doubts about its credibility.

At that time I served as publisher of *The American Conservative*, a small but generally well-regarded opinion magazine, and I eventually decided to commit my publication to providing the story the wider attention it so obviously deserved. By October I had gotten in touch with Syd, and spent several hours with him on the phone, explaining my interest, gaining his trust, and also assuring myself that he was still just as solid and sober a journalist as he had always been. I began preparations to republish his long expose as the cover story of one of my issues, making it the centerpiece of a symposium on government cover-ups and media lapses, with a special focus on the POW issue.

As part of that plan, I recruited a number of strong participants for the symposium, including Andrew Bacevich, the well-known military writer, the late Alex Cockburn, and even a former Republican House Member, who had independent evidence confirming the POW facts. Syd wrote a 2,000 word introductory piece entitled **"Silent Treatment,"** recounting his unsuccessful efforts to persuade any mainstream media outlet to investigate the scandal, and I added **an introduction**, providing my own perspective on the story and its implications.



My magazine had tens of thousands of regular readers, and with the story's prestigious placement and Syd's stature bolstered by the symposium contributors, I felt confident we would attract a great deal of mainstream attention. I was on friendly terms with quite a number of established reporters and opinion columnists, and sent them advance copies of the material, speaking with some of them by phone, and discovering that all were as shocked by Syd's revelations as I had been. Yet the result once again was utter and complete silence from mainstream media outlets, and no response to any of my follow-up

notes. I was later told that one of America's best-known investigative reporters read the story and found it stunning, yet he never said a word about it in public.

Although totally boycotted by the establishment media, the article and the related pieces were heavily discussed and reviewed on several popular alternative media websites, left, right, and libertarian, so the facts must have come to the attention of many of the regular journalists who frequent those sources of information, and the cover story of our very next issue provoked considerable mainstream coverage. But Syd's "scandal of the century" had seemingly vanished into the ether.

Not long afterward, Syd published a collection of his articles in book form, with his McCain/POW expose being one of the last and longest pieces. David Rohde, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning war reporter then at *The New York Times*, **described the outstanding journalism contained within**, writing that "Sydney Schanberg is one of the greatest war correspondents of the twentieth century," and the praise from Pulitzer Prize winner Russell Baker was equally fulsome. Joseph Galloway, a journalist who had authored major books on the Vietnam War, explicitly contrasted Syd's integrity with the shameful reticence of **nearly all other journalists who failed to acknowledge the reality of America's hundreds of abandoned Vietnam POWs. So the historical truth seems to be known and generally accepted within informed circles**, but no mainstream publication has been willing to allow it to reach the eyes or ears of the general population.

I do believe that the evidence is simply overwhelming to anyone with an open mind, and the universal silence of our media is the only slight contrary indicator. A few months ago I served on a government secrecy panel with **Daniel Ellsberg**, whose role in leaking the Pentagon Papers had established him one of America's leading voices on cover-ups of embarrassing military secrets. A major portion of my talk focused on Syd's POW findings, and the way in which the government and media had successfully colluded to keep the story hidden for over four decades. Ellsberg found the claims totally astonishing, and saying he'd never previously heard a word about them, eagerly took home copies of the article and some related material. At the dinner reception the next evening, he told me he'd carefully read them, and was fully convinced that everything was probably true.

At one point I also received a note from an elderly, rather prominent mainstream conservative academic. He told me that at the end of the Vietnam War he had been a young intelligence officer in Washington, and even after all these decades the abandonment of American POWs still made him sick to his stomach. He said he hoped that someday there might be a U.S. President willing to tell the American people the truth of what had actually happened. I asked him for permission to publish his remarks, even anonymously, but got no reply.

Syd had **always believed** that the American media was simply **scared** of his story, with its troubling implications, and I tend to agree with him. Just as the government has maintained its cover-up for all these years because admitting the truth would destroy too many reputations, crucial elements of the media may feel the same way. **There is the famous precedent** of Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty, whose reports from the Soviet Union regularly ridiculed claims of any significant Ukrainian famine during the 1930s and thereby helped ensure that **nearly all of America's elite media discounted and ignored the reports that millions were dying**. The *Times* took nearly sixty years before **finally admitting its error**.

And **the cautious and hierarchical structure of mainstream journalism** probably produces a cascading effect. The editor of any media outlet who might consider covering the POW scandal would naturally conclude that "it can't possibly be true or it would have already reached the headlines of one of America's leading publications." Meanwhile, the editors of any one of those latter outlets would note Syd's 26 years as a star journalist at the *New York Times*, and wonder why our national newspaper of record would be ignoring the story if it had any substantial basis in reality. And perhaps the editors making such decisions at the august *Times* itself would be ashamed to admit that they had completely ignored the facts for so long. A story which is "hot" will surely boost a journalist's career, but one which is "too hot" might risk destroying it.

Sometimes lower-ranking individuals are reluctant to stick their necks out on something so explosive, or even to trouble their superiors on the matter. Syd once told me that some years ago, he had dinner at his home with a retired Executive Editor of the *Times*, who was astonished to learn of the explosive POW findings, and dismayed that his own newspaper had never covered any of it at the time. "Why didn't you come to me yourself?," he asked. Syd responded that he considered it inappropriate to make a personal appeal for coverage on a story of such great significance, and that the material should stand or fall on its own journalistic merits. **They parted with some angry words.**

The historical events under discussion took place over forty years ago, and I am sure that many would suggest that they have little relevance today. I was just a child when the Vietnam War ended, and barely have a memory of it. The American troops deliberately left behind to die by our own government numbered less than one percent of their comrades who fell in battle, and merely the tiniest sliver of the millions of overall fatalities in **that misbegotten war.**

But from the very first time I have never believed that Syd's remarkable findings would significantly alter our view of the Vietnam War or even of our political leadership. The meaningful issue is not whether the Vietnamese Communists held our prisoners for ransom or whether American leaders sought to escape embarrassment by hiding that reality, but rather **whether our supposedly free and vibrant mainstream press can be trusted on anything important, with a cover-up of such length and magnitude suggesting a negative conclusion.** I think

it would be an important and absolutely fascinating exercise for some enterprising media journalist to go around to a considerable number of the appropriate editors and reporters, bring them face to face with Syd's remarkable findings, and ask them what did they know, when did they know it, and why did none of them ever decide to report it?

The media is an enormously powerful and shaping force in our society, and receives far less scrutiny than it should. Taken together, it constitutes the sensory organs of the body politic, and **if these grow unreliable, the results for our society can be disastrous, just as an animal in the wild with failing eyesight must surely face its doom.**

Twelve months ago I would have been quite pessimistic that Syd's revelations might reach the media headlines in the foreseeable future, but today a confluence of independent factors may have made that a real possibility.

Most pundits have been flummoxed by the recent rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, whose repeated victories over their establishmentarian opponents seemed to violate every rule of modern political campaigns. But I think the obvious explanation is the visceral, burning hatred of so many Americans, both left and right, toward what they perceive to be the total dishonesty and corruption of their reigning political and media elites.

Last year I published an article gathering together the limited available evidence concerning **John McCain's true wartime record**, and demonstrating that it seemed at utter variance with that presented by the media. In many respects, my piece was a coda to Syd's own POW expose, and I was gratified at the very kind words he extended to my work. John McCain is currently up for reelection in Arizona this year and deeply unpopular, with the latest poll putting him at **below 40% in his own Republican primary.**

Much of my analysis had focused on the strong indications that McCain spent nearly his entire imprisonment as a leading Communist collaborator, whose widespread propaganda broadcasts rendered him the "Tokyo Rose" of that era; later he concocted false claims of torture in order to protect himself against plausible accusations of treason. Although the evidence I found of McCain's broadcasts seemed persuasive, it was from secondary sources and inexact. But now the actual McCain tapes have been located and may soon be released. I've listened to one of them myself and it exactly matches the descriptions contained in my article, while an actual audio file naturally carries much greater evidentiary weight. And the very tight connection between McCain's deep wartime secrets and those surrounding the abandoned POWs ensure that if the first gains the awareness of the general public, the second will almost inevitably follow. McCain's sordid wartime record would represent the triggering fuse that might ignite a massive national political explosion.

Will the Arizona voters learn the true facts about John McCain? Perhaps, perhaps not. Trump is very much a loose cannon, whose 10 million agitated Twitter followers constitute an enormous alternative media distribution channel, and one which served him very well during the primaries. Just a few days ago, Trump **held a remarkably hostile meeting** with all the Republican senators, at which he threatened to personally ensure the defeat this year of Arizona Senator Jeff Flake. Apparently, he confused Flake, who is not up for reelection in 2016, with McCain, who is, and the latter has also been a major target of his political wrath.

Syd despised Donald Trump and everything he stood for, so it would be ironic indeed if Trump became the inadvertent vehicle of “the great cleansing of the Augean Stables” that Syd had sought for so many years.

I doubt if one American in twenty is aware that over forty years ago, his government deliberately abandoned hundreds of POWs in Vietnam, and then spent four decades desperately covering up that enormous crime, with the media being a willing co-conspirator. But even if our citizens remain ignorant of that particular dark deed, over the years they have strongly come to suspect their elites are guilty of a vast number of equally heinous offenses, some of which are plausible and others ridiculous; and who can reasonably blame them? If our entire media would willfully ignore “the story of the century” as massively documented by one of its most distinguished members, who can say what other matters might remain hidden from public view?

For years I’ve been telling my friends that unless and until our major media publications are finally willing to report Sydney Schanberg’s stunning POW expose, I simply won’t trust a word they write about anything else. And perhaps that is the most important legacy of one of America’s greatest journalists.

For Further Reading:

- [**Was Rambo Right?**](#) — Ron Unz
- [**Silent Treatment**](#) — Sydney Schanberg
- [**John McCain and the POW Cover-Up**](#) — Sydney Schanberg
- [**John McCain: When “Tokyo Rose” Ran for President**](#) — Ron Unz
- [**Our American Pravda**](#) — Ron Unz