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“War breeds myths” or, as Patrick Gallagher explains, war creates circumstances for vanquished nations to come to terms with their war experiences most often in the form of mythmaking (front flap). *Traumatic Defeat: POWs, MIAs, and National Mythmaking* compares the development of secret camp myths in Germany following the Second World War and in the United States following the Vietnam War. Gallagher argues that both countries were left to mourn their lost family members and find closure in the shadow of defeat, thus creating the secret camp myth as a coping mechanism. This myth emerged as a way for Germans and Americans to deal with the void, or “the no man’s land of grief,” left by the absence of traditional war heroes or a victorious nation (p. 1). Gallagher argues that “by focusing on [POWs and MIAs] West Germany and the United States minimized their own feelings of war guilt and recast themselves as victims of wars they had started” (p. 2). These two case studies examine how different nations use mythmaking and point to the drastic developmental differences of the secret camp myth in both countries. These differences help explain why the myth concluded in Germany after nearly a decade yet persisted in the United States.

Gallagher organizes his study into five chapters: the first two chapters focus on the German experience and the remaining three chapters focus on the American experience. He argues that the origins of secret camp myths in both Germany and America can only be understood in the context of the war preceding the myth. The way the war was fought greatly shaped how each country emerged in the postwar years. The German secret camp myth provided families a way to deal with their grief regarding the unknown status of their loved ones and “offered a way around the criminal legacy of the Nazi state” (p. 12). The Wehrmacht Casualty Office (WASt) and Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) played active roles in suppressing information about POWs and therefore contributed to the development of the secret camp myth during the war. Events of 1953-54 and 1955-56 led to the Soviet release of remaining German POWs and civilian internees and therefore brought an end to the German secret camp myth.

American POWs and MIAs largely came from the air services, which meant they were likely to be white, middle- or upper-class officers. These demographics also defined the families from which they came that then lobbied for the release of their prisoners. The persistence reflects socioeconomic status, according to Gallagher, as well as American politics. During Richard Nixon’s administration, growing distrust of the government led the American public to embrace the secret camp myth largely because of the lies from official sources. Gallagher argues that Nixon played a role in fostering the secret camp myth “because he overemphasized the number of POWs who could still be alive, then failed to bring home nearly that many in 1973” (p. 70). These discrepancies in official figures fostered the perpetuation of America’s myth.

The source base demonstrates research conducted in both Germany and the United States. Although Gallagher uses German-language sources, the lack of translation or explanation in the footnotes leaves German-language-deficient readers unable to fully appreciate the use of these sources. Connections between the larger na-
tional histories of the wars and these two "examples of postwar reconceptualization of morally ambiguous defeats" could have helped the reader better understand the lasting effects of these myths (p. 148). Ultimately, Gallagher draws interesting parallels between Germany and the United States since the wake of grand national traumas.

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