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Letter From a 'Homefront P.O.W.'

By Philip Berrigan

DANBURY, Conn.—I write this from a Federal correctional institution under relaxed provisions whereby Federal prisoners can comment on contemporary topics. My mail can now be sent sealed and uncensored. It is my first piece formally written for publication in 37 months of imprisonment.

I pose an enigma for my sisters and brothers outside these walls.

Recently, the Vietnamese released three American airmen shot down and captured while bombing their country. These fliers were freed despite their contribution to the most colossal air assault in history, including civilian targets—houses, schools, hospitals, churches, dikes and dams.

Returning to this country, the pilots expressed a common conclusion—Nixon (or McGovern) must end the war if P.O.W.'s, both North and South, are to be granted release and freedom. For every flier captured and jailed, another American resister enters a life of walls, bars and locks. It is an approximate and rough guide pro quo of opposites: men jailed for waging war, men jailed for waging peace. Both are pawns of American policy: the first, casualties of illegal invasion and automated terror; the second, of na-

tional arrogance and bureaucratic injustice.

It is time that Americans understand that Nixon's war—or Johnson's war, or Kennedy's war (all the way back to Truman)—has two fronts of aggression. One is against a remote peasant people, the other against them. Both fronts produce prisoners of war: the first because they say yes to murder and are caught doing it; the second because they say no. The first languish in Vietnamese jails, unfortunate hostages against a gigantic air and naval onslaught; the second disappear into Federal prisons, numbed and ignored.

I speak from some experience. For over three years, my friends have been homefront P.O.W.'s, including my brother Daniel. If I remain an example, it is because the warmakers take us seriously. Given six years for destroying draft files, I was reincarcerated in prison on preposterous charges of conspiracy to kidnap and bomb, to be sentenced finally to two concurrent years for a trifle called contraband mail, a "crime" no longer liable to prosecution.

Fifteen months ago I was denied parole without reason, and more recently, denied a review of that denial, again without reason. In the fuzzy and malicious official mind, I and others like me remain veiled threats

to Americans rash enough to struggle off their knees and onto their feet. So our unavailability is both antiseptic and neat—economical erasure and burial at a taxpayer's cost of 80 cents a day.

It has often occurred to me that the Government demands absolute freedom to conduct its wars. It demands freedom to remake reality to the white-handed vision of greedy entrepreneurs, Pentagon Prussians and Ivy League retreats who have read too much Metemich. It demands, above all, freedom to be contemptuous of an electorate which pays for its blunders in blood and taxes.

The Indochinese just happen to be in the way of demand; so do serious domestic dissenters. The first must be subjected to fire, steel and concussion from the skies; the second to burial in Federal cells until "rehabilitation" cools their consciences.

War stands as the ultimate lie. It is falsehood armed and carried to a murderous extreme. With profound cause, Scripture associates lying with killing—truth dies first in the mind, its death ratified in the deed. Christ called Satan "the father of lies" and "a murderer from the beginning." (John VIII, 44).

Concern and compassion among the people drain off like rainwater after a cloudburst. Morally speaking, Ameri-

cans are bleeding to death. 1984 for our country will mean not internal division or incipient violence but a moral lassitude so profound and so pervasive that we will allow any leadership, any public outrage, any crime in our name. So long as—as in ancient Rome—the leader guarantees us bread and circuses.

Where do people turn? Not necessarily to politicians, pulpits, academic chairs of wisdom—all have virtually defaulted their right to be taken seriously. But better to those with the wisdom of resistance and risk, those who have spent their lives to end this bloody, abominable war, those whose convictions and compassions have been purified in suffering—veterans of court and prison like my brother, the young Vietnam veterans against the war, ex-Federal prisoners organizing for peace, persons like Jane Fonda, Elizabeth McAlister, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, William Kunstler, Russell Magee and Angela Davis—to mention a bare few.

And finally, the prisoners of war in your local Federal joint. From such as these will come the truth about this war, about our leadership, about ourselves as a people. Or it may not come.

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