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Hanoi's P.O.W. Policy

To the Editor:

For the first time during the Vietnam conflict the American public has viewed an enemy propaganda film about the lives of prisoners of war in North Vietnam. Such films, however, have been made before (notably by an East German company in 1968) and seen in many parts of Europe, as well as the Communist world. High Administration sources have implied that such films are a violation of the Geneva Conventions and have condemned Hanoi for its blatant exploitation of the prisoners.

The film was, of course, propaganda—as, indeed, any fair-minded person must view our own spurious raid on the empty P.O.W. camp in Sontay—but it was not a violation of the Geneva Conventions. The fact is that the 1949 Convention relative to Treatment of Prisoners of War is conspicuously silent about subjecting prisoners to propaganda, or using them for propaganda purposes with their own consent. It is unlawful for a detaining power to expose prisoners to violence, intimidation, insults or public curiosity but it is stretching the law, for the purposes of American propaganda, to argue that the film violates the Convention.

Notwithstanding recent statements and innuendos by former American P.O.W.'s about the conditions of life in North Vietnamese prison camps, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that Hanoi has observed at least as humanitarian a policy as the Convention requires for civil wars. It has not observed the Convention in full (as required for international conflicts), and the U.S. Government, the press, and the American people should continue to pressure it to do so.

However, the increasing politicization of the emotional prisoner issue by the Administration for domestic political purposes will not help to improve internment conditions or secure the release and repatriation of P.O.W.'s. These are the only legitimate objectives of American P.O.W. policy.

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Boston, Dec. 31, 1970

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