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TV: Prisoners, or Pawns, of the War in Indochina

C.B.S. Offers Balance in Views on Issue

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

In journalism, perhaps more than in any other area, absolute fairness has a nasty habit of disintegrating into genteel tedium. A television case in point is the Columbia Broadcasting System's two-part news special entitled "P.O.W.'s—Pawns of War." The first hour-long installment was shown last week, the second last night at 10 P.M.

Now I don't mean to knock the pristine concept of fairness, of attempted objectivity. It's infinitely preferable to the school of "personal" reporting, the school of the erratic yet predictable ego trip. But fairness in an essay or TV documentary demands considerable skill. Obviously, either form relies for its effectiveness on a point of view. The expert in fairness will not ignore the opposing point of view but give it more than enough exposure for clever demolishment. The central viewpoint, though, must provide the dominant chord. The alternative, which marred a good portion of the "C.B.S. Reports" specials on American prisoners of war in North Vietnam, tends to be a distressingly flabby exercise in the art of "on the one hand . . . but on the other hand."

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The thrust of "P.O.W.'s—Pawns of War" was clear—that the political and military issue of the American prisoners was quite consciously turned into a political and emotional domestic issue by the Nixon Administration during the last two years. It became the focus of patriotic speeches, parades, mail-to-Hanoi campaigns, Red Cross expeditions, protest journeys to Europe and Indochina and private efforts by concerned philanthropists. The net change in the official status of the prisoners: zero.

In an excerpt from comments made last March 4, for example, President Nixon is heard stating that "as long as there are American P.O.W.'s in North Vietnam, we will have to maintain a residual force in South Vietnam." Meantime a wide range of opposition voices were challenging this position, maintaining that the prisoners would be released if a definite date were set for the withdrawal of all United States troops from Vietnam. While that contention can be debated, the official Administration position has indeed shifted in recent months.

In the words of Secretary of State William P. Rogers: "Although we have tremendous concern for the safety of the prisoners . . . we can't absolutely abandon our national objectives to pay ransom." And in the words of Senator Robert Dole, Republican National Chairman: "Our objective, of course, has been to give the South Vietnamese Government some reasonable opportunity for self-determination. The objective is still there." Given the former emphasis on the primacy of the prisoner issue, that's what charitably might be called — and is by Walter Cronkite, the anchorman — back-tracking.

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"P.O.W.'s—Pawns of War" does score several impressive points in its broad history of the issue, particularly in the first segment. The story of the prisoners, many of them pilots, runs parallel to the story of the bombing of Vietnam. Film clips of both the North Vietnamese and the prisoners provided first-rate examples of television journalism. The initial installment also traced the apparent let-up, even if only for purposes of propaganda, in the harsh treatment of the prisoners.

Mr. Cronkite then asks, "How well does Saigon treat its North Vietnamese and Vietcong prisoners?" As of last November, he answers, 583 enemy P.O.W.'s had died in captivity, adding that "C.B.S. News's repeated requests over three months to film prison conditions in South Vietnam have gone unanswered." There are also telling references to the "numbers game," with some officials and publications referring frequently to somewhere around 1,600 American prisoners and with the Pentagon listing 463 known captives throughout Indochina. The other side acknowledges 389 prisoners; Hanoi itself lists 368.

For the cool student of military gamesmanship, this can be interesting. For the families of the prisoners or missing in action, it means grief. The second installment of the series concentrated on this aspect of the question, with numerous interviews of the families involved and the growing disillusionment among many of them with official American policy.

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In fact, at the risk of seeming callous, it must be said that there was too many interviews. The essential points could have been made in two or three brief discussions. Instead, the viewer was confronted with dozens, many of them merely repetitive. And then, probably with a nervous eye on the flap over "The Selling of the Pentagon," Bernard Birnbaum and Philip Scheffler, the producers, were obviously at pains to keep everything in balance—on the one hand there were appearances by Senator Dole, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and Secretary of State Rogers, but on the other hand there was Senators J. William Fulbright and Edward M. Kennedy and Representative Paul N. McCloskey Jr.

The over-all impression was one of fatal padding. What might have been effective in a well conceived hour was oddly dissipated over a period of two hours. The "Pawns of War" turned out, unfortunately, to fall into the hands of "Practitioners of Waffling.

Video Essay Marred by Apparent Padding