



A Strange Silence Over POW Issue

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Washington

WHAT HAS BECOME of the American prisoners of war held by the North Vietnamese? Or, more precisely, what has become of our interest in their fate?

The disappearance can be traced to July 15. Before then the maneuvering over the return of the prisoners had been in the headlines almost daily; but since July 15 the POWs have dropped from public sight.

July 15, of course, was the day President Nixon surprised the world with the announcement of his forthcoming trip to Communist China. Even so, it is still not clear why this should have abruptly shut off the debate over the withdrawal of U. S. troops from Vietnam and the release of our prisoners.

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IT ISN'T as if Mr. Nixon and Premier Chou En-lai had struck a bargain over Vietnam, as a result of which the United States could count on China to pressure Hanoi to accept America's negotiating terms. Time and again since July 15, the Chinese government has emphasized that it totally supports the Viet Cong's seven-point peace proposal, and that it would never "mediate" between the United States and North Vietnam.

So the situation in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia remains unaltered. The war goes on as before.

Hanoi's peace negotiators in Paris earlier this month tried to refocus some attention on the POW issue by renewing their June offer of releasing the prisoners in return for the United States setting a definite date for the withdrawal of its forces in Vietnam, but when this was ig-

nored by Washington, it got slight attention. The administration's only concern at the moment is that the impatient wives and other relatives of the POWs will again start pressuring the government for action.

The administration is vulnerable to such pressure, for it chose to build up the POW issue in an effort to enlist the support of the prisoners' relatives. This culminated in the President coupling the withdrawal of U. S. troops from Vietnam with the release of the POWs. He said some American forces would remain until the captives were returned.

Mr. Nixon was trapped by this formula, however, when the communists suddenly announced they were prepared to start releasing the prisoners not after the war, but as soon as the United States agreed on a definite withdrawal date. The administration brushed it off, adding that total withdrawal was also contingent on Saigon's army being able to carry on the war without U. S. aid. Many relatives of the POWs were not happy.

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AT HIS latest press conference the President was asked why he had not formally responded to the communists' recently renewed peace offer. Mr. Nixon warned the press not to "get out on a limb," the implication being that something was going on secretly.

That may be, but the press must concern itself with the record, and the record shows no readiness on the part of the administration to negotiate with Hanoi and the Viet Cong on the withdrawal of our forces and the release of our prisoners.

Joseph Alsop is on vacation