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Hanoi's POW Double Talk

WASHINGTON—The callous and illegal treatment of U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam, violating nearly every provision of the Geneva Convention, has been a cunning tactic by Hanoi.

It is a cruel experience for the mothers, wives and relatives of the POW's and understandably they have been bringing pressure in every direction — Hanoi, Paris and Washington — to get their release.

THE GREATEST CRUELTY of all is the way the Hanoi government and its negotiators in Paris have played upon the emotions of the American people and especially the families of the POWs in periodically appearing to offer release of the prisoners in return for U.S. troop withdrawals and then withdrawing the apparent offer after it had stirred hope and confusion.

Whenever Hanoi could find willing channels such as third-party emissaries, sympathetic reporters or peace-at-any-price politicians like Sen. George McGovern, they have assured them that if President Nixon would set a fixed date for troop withdrawal, the American prisoners would be on the way home.

These negotiators have shown themselves totally insincere in what they alluringly offer.

They do say one thing to the McGoverns but say something quite different when they sit at the conference table in Paris.

This is deceptive double talk and the release of American POWs will be achieved sooner when it is seen for what it is.

On Sept. 16, Nguyen Thanh Le, speaking for the Hanoi negotiators, explicitly repudiated the "offer" which McGovern said had removed all his doubts. Le said: "There are two fundamental problems — the military and the political — and they are tied one to the other."

Hanoi defined the military problem as U.S. troop withdrawal and defined the political problem as requiring the United States to withdraw its support from the Saigon government and give no further American economic or arms assistance.

Le had told Sen. McGovern that prisoner release was conditional only upon troop withdrawal.

But Le told the U.S. government after he had seen McGovern that prisoner release was conditional upon several other things.

THE VIET CONG 7-point proposal, Le told our officials, "forms a whole and it is indispensable to reach agreement on the whole package."

This is the way Hanoi has been using the prisoners as propaganda pawns, to inhumanely play upon the hopes and fears of their families in the United States. And unfortunately, the McGoverns have been playing into their hands.