

Fate of Acknowledged and Unacknowledged P.O.W.'s

To the Editor:

Your Jan. 4 editorial "Hostages in Hanoi" unfortunately added to the superficiality characteristic of much comment on the P.O.W. issue. Apart from the merits of political figures, it is vital to an understanding of what is at stake for the victims that difficulties which the North Vietnamese and many Americans choose to ignore be understood and considered.

The effect of your editorial is to propose the abandonment of over three-quarters of the Americans captured in Southeast Asia. Over 1,700 Americans are involved as prisoners and missing personnel. The North Vietnamese and their colleagues have refused to account for over 1,300 of them. After enormous pressures were exerted they did grudgingly furnish some details respecting the others, and that was rigidly tailored to their propaganda requirements. The overwhelming evidence has demonstrated the consistent maltreatment of all captured Americans, as a matter of official policy, and has contradicted the captors' claim of civilized prisoner treatment.

The Paris proposals which you recommend were no more than a suggestion to release the prisoners whose existence has been acknowledged by the other side. There has never been a proposal to account for the remaining 1,300, many of whom survived capture.

The North Vietnamese and their colleagues have demonstrated a disrespect for human life which is not open to argument. Their complete indisposition to honor their promises is equally well established. Is it reasonable to propose that, if they are permitted to extricate themselves from this war without a prior verified accounting for what they have done to their captives, they will refrain from burying their sins? Is it reasonable to propose that, when the pressure is removed, they will permit the exposure of their inhumanity? Clearly not.

This nation owes an unlimited moral obligation to the captured Americans whom we sent into battle. It is a public disgrace to propose the abandonment of these Americans to discretionary disposal by a guilty

enemy who has only hate and contempt for us.

American concern for the fate of these 1,700 men—all of them—is valid and substantial. However, the matter does not end with them. I find nothing persuasive in predictions of "no more war." The tragic fact is that there probably will be other conflicts. The children growing up today are candidate for maltreatment as P.O.W.'s in the future. The consequences of their capture will reflect the precedents achieved now. Their suffering will be measured by our indifference.

The President's comments, which you criticize, referred not only to those identified as prisoners, but also to the far larger number of men missing and unaccounted for. The Paris proposal, which you recommend, evades the question of the missing men. Your insensitivity to this distinction is extremely lamentable.

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