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The Forgotten Victims

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, April 9—President Nixon's response to the Communist offensive in Vietnam, his escalation of air and naval bombardment, has special and agonizing meaning for one group of people: the wives and families of American prisoners.

More than anyone else, they must realize that the Nixon policy now offers no realistic hope of an end to American military involvement in Indochina. And in all likelihood that means no end to the captivity of their husbands, sons, brothers and fathers.

The feelings of the wives and families are likely to have political significance as the year 1972 goes on. Mr. Nixon, recognizing their potential as a focus of antiwar emotions, has taken great care with the families: his aides have cultivated them, and he himself made a surprise appearance at the last meeting of their organization. But resentment of the President—a feeling that he has defaulted on a pledge to get the men out—is now growing.

AT HOME ABROAD

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The President's credibility among the prisoners' families was falling before the latest military turn in Vietnam. An example of that trend can be seen in Mrs. Audrey Craner, whose husband, Lieut. Col. Robert Roger Craner, was shot down over North Vietnam on Dec. 20, 1967. She has had one brief letter from him since then, and she does not know whether any of her letters to him has got through.

Mrs. Craner is English-born, and she struggles in a very English way to contain her anguish. She has not wanted her husband's plight to be caught up in politics; she has resisted those among the families who favor politicizing the prisoner issue. But now, painfully, her words are changing.

"Mr. Nixon keeps saying the war will not be an issue in the election," Mrs. Craner said a while ago, "but I can't believe that. He came in on a promise to end the war. He made clear in his last [January] speech how difficult that is, but he made the promise.

"I assume that Mr. Nixon means what he says when he says he will be responsible for the prisoners, so he must expect us to hold him responsible. If he gets those men out, I'll be glad to back him in the election. I'm sorry to be so selfish, but . . ."

Mrs. Craner appreciates the argument for continuing American effort to keep the Government of Nguyen Van Thieu in power in Saigon. She says that her husband is a career officer who understood the risk of war and would have thought his captivity a burden to be borne for the sake of American political objectives. But then she says: "That's what I believe he would have said five years ago, but now I don't know."

Others among the prisoners' families are much less cautious than Mrs. Craner, much more politically committed. An example in Washington, D. C., is Sheila Cronin, whose brother was shot down on Jan. 13, 1967. He is Navy Lieut. Comdr. Michael P. Cronin.

Miss Cronin and others are working in their spare time to put pressure on President Nixon by supporting candidates who would end the war and get the prisoners home. They expect to go to both national conventions.

"When the President spoke in January about the secret peace talks," Miss Cronin said, "we didn't understand a lot of things. We went to the White House and spoke with a staff man from the National Security Council. I asked him a lot of questions, and I didn't get a straight answer to a single one. At the end he told me that I should give their peace plan ten months—which would keep us quiet long enough to get Nixon re-elected."

One episode played a significant part in the politicizing of Sheila Cronin. That was what she calls the President's "misrepresentation of the facts" in his television interview with Dan Rather of C.B.S. last Jan. 2.

In that interview the President said flatly that the United States had offered the North Vietnamese "the deal of saying if we set a deadline" for total withdrawal, "then they will give us back our P.O.W.'s." The North Vietnamese, he said, had "totally rejected" this proposal—"a very cruel action on their part."

But that was fiction. The United States has never disclosed having made any such proposal for an even exchange—total withdrawal in return for the prisoners—even in the secret talks.

There is certainly no assurance that the other side would have accepted the idea. They might have last summer, before General Thieu's re-election; they might not. But there has never been any sign of willingness on Mr. Nixon's part to make such a deal, at least to date.

Even by our degraded standards of political truthfulness, such a calculated misrepresentation was, and is, staggering. The wives and families are not likely to forget it—or, if they have any access to the public conscience, to let the rest of us forget it.