Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace

by Taylor Branch

On May 5, the families of the American soldiers missing or held prisoner in Indochina gathered in a large basement room of the Marriott motel, across the highway from the Pentagon, to debate the war. As the political controversy over Vietnam continued to be honed down almost to a dispute over the best way to secure the release of the prisoners, the families of those prisoners, ironically, held a national "Where Do We Go From Here?" meeting to argue strategy regarding the war itself, the big picture, with an eye on the election. The weekend event had the earmarks of any Washington convention—the panelists fumbling with water glasses, caucuses, plenary sessions, boredom, the lame but necessary jokes of the genial moderator (in this case, Louis Stockstill, a former Pentagon flak and *Reader's Digest* author), lunch breaks, shop talk, and dinner speakers—but the meeting's purpose and its people, the collected flesh relatives of the endless names on the Defense Department's prisoner and missing lists, gave the Marriott basement a macabre atmosphere.

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It was a conference of bouffants and beehives, elderly couples, military wives, Elks, and church-goers—on the whole, people who could never become alienated from their positive view of the military or from their staunch patriotism. It was a critical cross-section of mainstream Americans, united by the fact that the war is an intensely personal issue with them, having weighed like a stone every day for years. They epitomized what doves have called responsible citizens on the war—people who have lived and breathed the arguments and books on Vietnam, studying, measuring the continuation of the war against their own future sacrifices, measuring withdrawal against their past sacrifices, their pain against the flag, the war's trumpets and ideals against its doubts and its blood. For most of the relatives, it was a bitter

but genuine struggle. President Nixon could have snapped almost everyone to a salute any time by entering with a military escort and a Marine band, but he wasn't there, and surprisingly sharp divisions about the war existed alongside the unifying feeling that its burdens were in everyone's throat.

The relatives approached the POW issue from almost every conceivable psychological state and political angle. Some held tenaciously to a simple article of faith—in the benevolent wisdom of the President, in the power of prayer vigils, in the ability of an unshackled military to cut through the diplomatic paste to get real action—while others waded into the various alleyways of peace analysis or into how the President's peace strategy depends on the monsoon rains hitting the Central Highlands by June 10 to shore up this or that ARVN division. These views often clashed head-on, and the room cracked with a tension overload when one relative stood up and said in a quivering voice that the dovish thoughts of the military wife in the next chair were keeping the POWs locked up by dividing the country and thereby prolonging the war, or when a distraught, dovish old POW father charged that Administration supporters were buying time for the President to keep bombing and that the super-patriots were actually opportunists "crawling into White House favor up the backs of your own POWs."

It's Not Easy to Talk

Despite the importance of the POWs to the election this year, the meeting of the families was hardly covered by the press, apparently because their image as patsies for the Administration had driven the media away in boredom. But I found this image highly misleading—the families may have looked like Nixonettes and Legionnaires, but there was a raging tempest within the group of 2,700 relatives (about 400 of whom journeyed to Washington for the meeting), organized as the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

Joan Vinson was a tip-off that stereotypes of the League are off base. She is from Tupelo, Mississippi, the wife of an Air Force colonel and West Point graduate missing in action (MIA) over North Vietnam since April, 1968. Her social life centers around her husband's former colleagues, who are high Air Force officers, with a sprinkling of generals by now. She has been a moving force in the League since its inception in 1970, and served as its national coordinator in 1970-71. Yet despite all the credentials of a classic hawk, Joan Vinson stood out in the corridor, a bit aloof from the meeting. "I'm getting very cynical," she said, "and I never thought I would. We've been through all this for so long now that it's hard to think it matters. We get up little spurts of hope every time it looks like something's going to happen to get this over with, but it's hard even to feel that any more. We have had meetings with Kissinger from the beginning. He said, 'Give us six more months. Our books will be open and you will see that we have done everything we could.' But it's hard to see anything in Vietnamization for the prisoners. You know, in a way we're in danger of becoming very selfish, and it's not right. I don't want the prisoners to be the reason for withdrawing from the war. I'm afraid there'll be a backlash against them from the doves who think they're the reason the war doesn't end. Or maybe one from the hawks, who think we're abandoning Vietnam because of the POWs. We've got to end the war regardless of the prisoners and then do the best we can to get them back. As it is now, it's not easy to talk to the North Vietnamese about the treatment of POWs because of all the devastation we're causing in their country."

Marsha Schoeffel, the elderly wife of a retired Navy admiral, also said that we should not withdraw just for

the sake of the prisoners, even for her son, Navy Commander Peter Schoeffel, who was shot down on October 4, 1967. But her thoughts ran in the opposite direction of Joan Vinson's. "I can't believe that we can leave the South Vietnamese," she said sorrowfully. "If that's done, then every one of these lives and these sacrifices is meaningless, absolutely meaningless."

Marsha Schoeffel has hung on out of pride for her son. "My son was shot down on his 186th combat mission," she said, "and he made 600 landings on the *Intrepid* in his F-4, 100 at night. His whole purpose was to be a Naval aviator. He had to exercise his eyes 15 minutes a day for over 10 years to get in the pilot program. Now Peter's been a communist prisoner for four-and-a-half years, and his morale has been superb. That's kept me out of the hospital. You know, we should have really gone in there and cleaned this war up and gotten out. I think my son was shot down by anti-aircraft that was put in during one of those bombing halts."

"You're right, Mom. I think this country is losing its guts," added Peter's sister bitterly and matter-of-factly, as if she had said it many times before. "And I think the majority of the POWs would rather be dead than red. We would certainly rather be dead than red, and so we don't want to get the POWs back by surrender."

"The communal living of the North Vietnamese is religiously correct," concluded the mother, crying thoughtfully, "but morally wrong in its imposition on other people. I really don't think the South Vietnamese are worth the powder to blow them up with, but we are up against communism."

Most of the relatives are not as selfless about the prisoners as Joan Vinson or Marsha Schoeffel, but their thoughts collided in taut, strained exchanges—with dearly-held principles coming from seemingly the wrong kinds of people in unexpected, odd combinations. The effect was baroque and often absurd.

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Admirals and *Catch 22*

Jane Denton, whose husband has been a prisoner in North Vietnam for seven years, touched off the fireworks at one point when she went to a floor mike to offer a resolution from the Virginia delegation of POW-MIA families. A very troubled, likable, intelligent woman, she wore red, white, and blue, with a Navy anchor emblem, and spoke with an almost lyrical Mobile, Alabama/Tidewater Virginia accent. She surprised the audience when she began reading her resolution: "Mr. President, in this election year, we remember your promise to end the Vietnam war and bring the prisoners home. We will hold you accountable for that promise, and we will remind the people of your failure thus far. . . ."

"That resolution is aiding and abetting the enemy," shouted Joe McCain, bolting from his chair. As bearded and intense-looking as any SDS campus theoretician, he is the brother of a POW and the son of Admiral John McCain, commander of the Pacific fleet. McCain jumped up all weekend, sometimes with conciliatory, politic words for the doves, but usually to issue a denunciation of the North Vietnamese. He was nearly obsessed by the evidence that Hanoi's POW list is not complete, and he advocated publicity campaigns of the Ross Perot variety to bring the pressure of world opinion down on the enemy. (One of his achievements was to obtain League sponsorship for the flight of two old B-25's from the West Coast to Washington to carry tons of mail for Congress on the POW identification problem. "The Speaker of the House and other dignitaries will hold a press conference to receive the mail," he declared. "Eastern Air Lines is donating the oil, and Shell is donating the gas. And the two most famous stunt pilots in the world will fly the planes. One of them flew through a billboard in *Around the World in 80 Days.* The other one flew over live flak in *Catch 22.*")

"I resent the implication that I'm aiding and abetting the enemy," said Jane Denton, very much taken aback. A brief argument ensued, with McCain applauding the renewed bombing, while the dignified Navy wife, a weekend house guest of Chief of Staff Elmo Zumwalt, seemed hurt that her patriotism had been challenged. The life quickly ebbed from the dispute between the admiral's son and the admiral's guest, as the difference between the two kinds of treason—of undermining the Commander during a war, or of paying respect to the bombing through silence—came to seem minor, almost a simple question of tactics. It looked as if ending the war would require one kind of treason or the other, and many of the families weaved back and forth almost daily. The Denton resolution failed by a narrow margin.

"With feelings running so high, I think it's remarkable that we get along as well as we do," said Frances Ford, a POW mother. "In the North and South war, there were brothers on opposite sides, and we're the same way. The only thing that gets me a little is when they say we're traitors if we don't support the President. I'm D.A.R. on both sides of the family, and I'm 100-per-cent American. But I don't support the President because he's buying time with us. I think this war's being fought for the upper crust."

Over the Years

The extent of the conflict among the families was surprising in itself, but after only a few hours at the convention, what kept pounding home was that the people who commanded your respect were still adrift on the war in the sense of being troubled by their position, hawk or dove. Because they have been chained to the war through their men for so long, it seemed almost essential that they would have adopted some simplifying assumptions—that they would have made some leaps of faith to resolve

their doubts. But they didn't. What you saw in a woman like Jane Denton was an anguished dove, a crucible in which the best motives for our original involvement in Vietnam were still being seared and tested by the arrogance of the killing. There were hawks like that, too, and in neither case was there a sense of release or of moral certainty. Those who recited dove or hawk scripture seemed sadly out of touch for some reason, almost pathetic. I had felt more and more certain in my opposition to the war over the years, and this impression rocked me.

Not all the relatives seemed ennobled by their ordeal, of course. After several years of the POW pressure cooker, there were people who have been driven to the shrink's couch, people reduced to numbness, war freaks, and even some in whom grief had rotted into opportunism. "Look here," said one POW wife after a few drinks, "the first thing you've got to understand about this is that the prisoners are not supermen and we're not superwomen. We're just like everybody else, and a lot of these marriages weren't so great even before the men went over there. See that woman over there," she asked, pointing to a blonde who was bouncing around with the conciliatory enthusiasm of a Jaycee booster. "Her husband is a captain, and she wants him to be an admiral. The men are still up for promotion while they're prisoners, and we live off their rank in a lot of ways. There's a temptation to politick for promotion by trying to please the Pentagon. Not many do it, but some." The money problem is especially tough on the wives of the 1,100 MIAs, the vast majority of whom will no doubt be classified as dead when the war ends and they don't turn up in prison camps. "I live off my husband's normal salary now, just like he had never left," said a missing officer's wife, "but when the war ends and my husband is presumed dead, which I think will happen, I start living off his pension. It's less than half as much, much less. Things like that creep into your head over the years and make you feel even worse."

Hope is much more difficult for the MIA families than for the POW relatives, who know from the letters they get that there will be a reunion when the war ends. The MIA wives tended to be more hawkish, perhaps because they felt sure they had already made their sacrifice and wanted it to count for something—something that withdrawal couldn't bring. "I was an MIA wife for two years, and I have been a POW wife for two more," said Jean Crumpler, "and being an MIA is so much harder. You have no status. You're not single, not married, not a widow, and you know that the chances of an MIA are pretty slim. In a strange way, you subconsciously don't want to face a settlement, because you are so sure how it will end. That's why there is a tendency to say that the President has done everything possible to end the war." When the North Vietnamese say they have no prisoners other than the 339 on their official list, and the Pentagon counters

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by saying there are more prisoners and that the ruthless enemy is concealing some, it is nearly irresistible for each MIA wife to believe that *her* husband might be a concealed prisoner. "Who would you want to believe?" asked one.

During meals and informal gatherings all weekend, the relatives seemed to cluster less according to politics than to the status of the men. The MIA families would come together to exchange the shreds of evidence they had that their men are alive, or to discuss the legal problems involved in selling property listed in an MIA's name, or to consult about how to handle the children. Mrs. Mark Stephenson said that her husband's wingman saw a parachute open when her husband's plane was shot down over North Vietnam in April, 1967. No word has been heard of him since. "That parachute's good enough for me," said Mrs. Stephenson. "You have faith, especially with a pilot like Mark. He's the best. He started preparing me for this kind of thing when we first got married. He would say, 'It may take me a while, but I'll come home.' You know, I enjoy being an Air Force wife. I don't look forward to moving off the base when Mark retires."

The families of the known POWs talked a lot about the treatment of their men, and about the mail and packages Hanoi allows the prisoners to receive from time to time. (Most of the mail goes through the Committee of Liaison, a New York group headed by peace activists Cora Weiss and David Dellinger. The committee is thoroughly disliked by most of the families, who resent its close relationship with Hanoi and its end-the-war message, but it is the best source of mail and the families put up with it.) "I don't think my husband gets nearly all the letters I send," said Jane Denton wearily. "On those little five-line letters the North Vietnamese let him write, he still asks me whether the children have started college. I've written him about that a dozen times. My Lord, they're almost out of college."

As pilots in the air have become the key to the American terms of war in Indochina, it is fitting that the pilots shot out of the air have become the heart of the terms for peace. The President has said repeatedly that we will not leave until all U. S. prisoners are returned and the missing accounted for.

It seems that an awesome amount of war is being fought over what the Pentagon counts as about 500 POWs and 1,100 MIAs. (Hanoi says it holds 339 prisoners, a hotly disputed figure, and there are about 100 more in South Vietnam and Laos.) Sixteen hundred men, a tiny fraction of the casualties of the war's purpose, have now become *the war's purpose. Such elevation of the prisoner issue is inconceivable in the context of most previous wars. If the Nazis had threatened to execute or hide away their Allied POWs unless Eisenhower halted the invasion of Germany, our belief in that war would have allowed us to write off the POWs if necessary, and we would have continued the invasion with pain but with conviction. Now, the North Vietnamese are using the POWs for leverage, and it is precisely because the country does* not *believe in the war that we cling to the POWs. The pain of abandoning a prisoner rises as belief in the war falls. You cannot write them off for nothing, so you make more in spite of yourself. Between March 11 and June 24 of this year, 137 new Americans were reported missing or captured. This is more than were lost during the entire first year of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign in 1965.*

The POWs remain incarcerated in such places as the "Hanoi Hilton," an old French prison built to shackle Vietnamese rebels against Paris colonialism, and now used by those very rebels to hold some of the Americans who have succeeded the French as their enemy. This will be the third presidential election in captivity for some of the pilots, and most of them have missed at least two or three

congressional elections. "My brother wanted to be an astronaut," said Robert Brudno, "so he went into the Air Force from MIT to become a test pilot and hopefully to get in the space program. He had no opinion on the war at all when he was sent over." Prisoner Brudno, straight out of the era when students idolized astronauts, was shot down in February of 1965 and has been frozen in time ever since—a fresh memory when Martin Luther King and a heroic LBJ congratulated each other at the signing of the Voting Rights Act, a fuzzier memory nearly four years later when Nixon was elected, or nearly five years later when the Mets won their first pennant. Now, after seven and a half years, he is almost a figure of history, even to his familiy.

The return of Captain Brudno is the only American war aim that the Nixon Administration feels comfortable talking about in public. You can find older, crustier goals if you look for them, such as independence for South Vietnam; but they are in the closet, and from all the talk and the press releases you would think we are bombing and blockading just to get the North Vietnamese to show signs that they will give the men back.

No More Cashew Nuts

On Saturday evening, May 6, the POW-MIA families assembled anxiously to hear from the Nixon Administration, represented by Dolf Droge of Henry Kissinger's staff. He was considered a come-down from the League's September, 1971 annual meeting, which President Nixon and Secretary Melvin Laird had attended in full plumage, but Droge was authorized to speak for the Administration. He faced a disgruntled audience, divided almost equally between frustrated Administration backers and frustrated people who had made their break. He is a classy, articulate showman—very tall and lanky, dressed in a smart suit and leather boots, with long and stylish hair, looking and coming off a little like the Galloping Gourmet. He sat casually on the front table and reached with his pointer to the large map of Indochina behind him, illustrating various strategic situations almost without looking. Saddled with the task of explaining to the POW families why they must wait, he began by demonstrating his knowledge of Vietnam—spewing out figures on the number of independent cities, the names of ARVN division commanders, the vagaries of the weather in the Central Highlands, and the performance of the South Vietnamese army in the current offensive as compared with Tet in 1968.

"The test of Vietnamization is now," said Droge, digging in for a long night. "Our residual force will remain in South Vietnam solely for the purpose of obtaining the return of the POWs. The only other reason was to prepare the South Vietnamese for battle, but that has already passed because the test is here and they are fighting. . . .

"The President came into office in 1969 and said to the North Vietnamese, 'OK, negotiate me out.' And the North Vietnamese turned him down. We could have gotten out. We would have had to, and I think the North could have had the South by now. . . .

"The North Vietnamese view the prisoners as a ransom, and they are playing military cards, testing the South Vietnamese. They are trying the military route, and if they fail they will come back to the negotiating table. . . .You get the POWs back by going to the North Vietnamese at the table after beating them on the battlefield."

The Administration's supporters seemed a little restless with this position, which placed such heavy reliance on the South Vietnamese and which was so conciliatory in its peace terms. A man at the front of the room brought them alive by proposing to unleash all air and naval power against the North Vietnamese to force them to give back the POWs. About half the

audience applauded thunderously, but Droge had to duck around the proposal.

Then a little woman approached a microphone in the back. "I come from Brooklyn, and I pray for peace," she said trembling. "We cannot drop any more bombs on those people over there while we are asking for the POWs. Please take my message back to the President."

More thunderous applause. "I will support any demonstration for peace that has a sign saying 'U. S., Get Out of South Vietnam!' as long as the other side says 'Hanoi, Get Out of South Vietnam!' " Droge said. His voice began to rise toward a shout for the first time, "Two wrongs don't make a right, but it takes two sides to end a war!" The house came down, with a broad cross-section of applause.

"If you could get the men back as you say, by withdrawing, then no one would argue with you," Droge concluded. "But Hanoi has said that they will not give back the POWs unless we overthrow the South Vietnamese government. The North has said no. Withdrawal is not enough."

"So what can we do then?" asked one of the wives, apparently frustrated that the North Vietnamese are rejecting a more dovish position than the Administration had ever offered.

"I would do everything I could to make the POWs the main cultural and social issue in the United States," said Droge. "The American people have not really shown that they care about Red Cross inspection of the prison camps. People have tried to get the last step, release, before crossing the near step of getting the Red Cross in there. Where are the songs, the plays, the movies, and the cultural displays that show that the American people care? You can't do it by government. The people have to do it. North Vietnam knows that the concern has not been from the people doing it so far. It has been the Administration doing it."

Audible whispers of anger rustled through the crowd. This was obviously not what the families wanted to hear—that their best bet is to drum up more theatrics in the grass roots to get better treatment for the men. "I'm not going to ask another person to write a letter to Hanoi," Charlotte Christian, wife of a five-year POW, said privately. "I don't want any more commemorative stamps or memorial trees planted, and it doesn't really matter whether I can send an extra 69-cent can of cashew nuts in his package of powdered milk. I want my husband home." Droge went on into the night, but the crowd thinned, with many sad and angry looks in the hallways.

By midnight, the audience was reduced to about 75 of the more conservative family members, and Droge began to regain his form. His earlier performance had pleased neither the hawks nor the doves—the doves because they either didn't believe his generous peace terms or were frustrated by their failure to produce, the hawks because they didn't like the terms themselves or because there was so little patriotic rhetoric to march with. Droge began to serve up phrases that were more pleasing to the holdouts. "I think that the prisoners will want to end the war with the consequences for South Vietnam in mind. They know what total surrender would mean. They know how many people were killed after the communists took over the North. . . . Hanoi is the dishpan. Moscow and Peking are the faucets. . . ."

"I think the others should have heard this, Mr. Droge," said one grateful POW wife who had been pressing for a policy of bombing the dikes north of Hanoi. "My husband would rather die in a bombing raid than to rot in a no-win, no-lose war. He would want to have given everything to something he believed in."

At about 1:30 in the morning, with some 30 stalwarts marveling at the speaker's stamina, a woman summed it up emphatically: "We want our men, and we want an independent South Vietnam."

"I want those things, too," said Droge. "And believe me, you're closer to getting your men back now than you ever have been before."

Zumwalt's Shot in the Arm

The National League of Families met on Sunday morning in its final business session to take action on the resolutions developed in the Saturday caucuses. The old battles continued over whether it is unpatriotic not to support the President or foolish to do so. A resolution passed unanimously to call upon all presidential candidates to place trade embargoes on all nations doing business with North Vietnam if the POWs are not released before the election. Another resolution called for the League to support the President in his efforts to obtain the release of the POWs and an accounting of the MIAs. There was heated debate. "If you pass a resolution supporting the President," said an opponent, "we will just be stamped pro-Administration again." "We are not supporting him in the war," came the reply. "We are supporting unity in his efforts to get the POWs back. We are in a moment of crisis, and we are doing what we're supposed to do." This one passed by only five votes. In a striking reversal, another resolution passed declaring the Vietnamization policy to be a failure as a means to end the war and obtain the return of the prisoners.

In the midst of these flip-flopping resolutions, a heavily-medaled admiral strode to the platform in a surprise visit. It was Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, who stood congenially but authoritatively at the podium receiving the applause of the startled relatives, looking a lot like the President himself with John L. Lewis eyebrows. The audience rose. At last, somebody looked as if he could guide us out of this wilderness with his strong voice and his command and his power.

"I know I'm not supposed to be here, but I decided to come anyway," he began, smiling. "We had Sybil Stockdale and Jane Denton staying with us, and I got a feeling of discontent at breakfast this morning. . . ."

"He's gonna pacify us now," whispered a middle-aged woman in the back, giggling.

The Admiral's speech was serious and optimistic, firm to the enemy and yet warm to the families, going over essentially the same ground that Droge had covered the night before. He repeated his central message at the end, when asked how he planned to get the POWs back: "If there's one thing I'm confident of, it's that even if we pulled out, dumped Thieu, and turned over the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese still would not give the prisoners back. They would just give us another demand. The only time they will negotiate is when they have no alternative. My own feeling is that the worst possible prospect for getting the POWs back would be if South Vietnam fell, and that the best prospect for getting the prisoners back would come if we blunted the North Vietnamese offensive and left them with no alternative other than negotiation."

While the Admiral acknowledged the clapping, a POW wife rushed to the microphone: "I think we needed a shot in the arm, Admiral, and you sure gave it to us."

Zumwalt exited to a standing ovation about 25 minutes after the Vietnamization failure measure had passed, and the conference resumed the resolution business. You could feel a great magnet of hope from the Admiral, and it lingered through a few get-tough resolutions, but the debate and the bitter division resurfaced.

From the beginning, the POWs have been considered a weapon for the hawks–sympathy for them has been associated with love-it-or-leave-it stickers, and the kind of patriotism that keeps the war going. The Nixon Administration "went public" on the POW issue in 1969, when Secretary Laird held a press conference for Navy Lieutenant Robert Frishman, the last

of nine POWs released by North Vietnam, at which Frishman detailed the barbaric treatment he had witnessed in the prison camps. (He later retracted some of the more gruesome stories.) The New York Times *reported: "Lt. Frishman said the prisoners could watch American bombing flights, which were 'real morale boosters,' from their quarters. He said that after the bombings stopped, prisoners' spirits declined."*

From the Ross Perot missions and the "Write Hanoi" extravaganzas to the Son Tay raid, the Administration has gained the upper hand in the POW issue by exhibiting simple concern, or, as Laird said of Son Tay, "showing that we care"–showing Hanoi, showing the American people, showing the voters, showing the armed forces, showing the POWs. In some ways, it is remarkable that expressions of sympathy have been sufficient to gain a reputation as the POWs' champion, inasmuch as the Administration's record on prisoners has, like the Son Tay raid, been long on sympathy and highly questionable, if not adverse, on results. Consider a brief summary of the record.

In early 1969, the Nixon Administration reversed LBJ's policy of silence about POWs–a policy that had been based on the traditional idea that North Vietnam would not release the prisoners until the end of the war, anyway, and that public outcry would only increase their hostage value. As astronaut Frank Borman told the Congress after President Nixon sent him on a world tour to talk up the POWs, "I think that one of the unfortunate aspects of the mobilization of public opinion. . . is that everything we do really reinforces the fact that they are an asset from our standpoint, that we do care about these men, that they have value to us." When Secretary Laird went public on the issue of prisoner treatment, Administration officials said they didn't want to detail bad treatment of the POWs for fear that it might irritate Hanoi enough to hold up their release. Soon, however, the Administration was using POWs to make highly publicized allegations of bad treatment, and Hanoi promptly stopped the sporadic "good will" releases. The North Vietnamese also vehemently protested that the Pentagon was using some of the freed POWs to train more pilots for the bombing campaign. Meanwhile, according to Seymour Hersh, the Air Force wrote POW families that they shouldn't be too disturbed about all the torture material being fed to the media "if you keep in mind the purpose for which it was tailored."

By 1970, the hoopla was in full gear, with Perot, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Frank Borman, and others flying all over the world. The Administration encouraged and assisted the formation of the League of Families, allowing the families to speak out for the first time. The perils of doing so had been so thoroughly drilled into them that many of them found it hard to accept the policy switch. "The first meeting I went to, I literally wore sunglasses like a movie star," said Jane Denton. "I didn't want to be recognized, because I was still afraid they might take reprisals against my husband in Hanoi." In addition to the publicity barrage, the Administration tantalized the families with its proposals for an immediate prisoner exchange, independent of the war or the negotiations, even though almost all officials who have been involved with the war have always believed that Hanoi will never release American POWs in advance of a settlement.

The Administration scored heavily with its denunciations of the North Vietnamese for not allowing Red Cross inspection of the POW camps. In defense, the leadership in Hanoi points to a special reservation in the North Vietnamese accession to the Geneva Convention stating that "war criminals" have no inspection rights. There is obviously strong feeling in Hanoi that the pilots are in fact war criminals–intervening in a war among the Vietnamese, dropping "smart bombs" on the population of a coun-

try that doesn't bomb the United States—but the North Vietnamese also have political and strategic reasons for refusing international inspection. They fear that regular visits by Red Cross teams would pinpoint the exact locations of the POW camps for U. S. intelligence. This would make them vulnerable to more widespread bombing because the U. S. would no longer have to worry about hitting its own POWs, and it would also make more Son Tay raids possible. If the torture allegations and the bombing and the use of released POWs to train pilots had not already severed hopes for inspection or more prisoner releases, the Son Tay raid definitely did so. But, according to Laird, the raid raised morale on every front.

The expressions of concern hit home with the public and the prisoner families, despite their lack of effectiveness—and also despite their eerie inappropriateness, which is striking when you see that most of the ceremonies and salutes to the men are the same ones that would be held if they were dead. Florida builds a memorial to its POWs in a cemetery. The Vice President lights a special star on the top of the White House Christmas tree. The Post Office issues a commemorative stamp. As with slain soldiers, the atmosphere hints that there is nothing to be done, that the problem is not one to be solved but to be endured by huddling together. This, of course, is true if you assume that there is no way, or no acceptable way, to get the prisoners back. But if you assume that Hanoi would return the prisoners upon our total withdrawal, then the ceremonies seem deceptive and out of place. Deceptive because they do not openly acknowledge that our daily choice helps keep the men there, not fate. Out of place because they abandon the problem to the past tense, like a surgeon who stops to eulogize a live patient during an operation.

I think the Administration officials I saw are genuinely concerned about the POWs and their families, who have been "their" people. The suffering is nevertheless not fully honest. No Nixon representative told the POW families bluntly that the prisoners would almost certainly be released only at the end of the war, and that the war is not ended because we still believe in it too much to accept Hanoi's terms for peace. Instead, they skipped directly to the next logical step—to the sympathy and the praise. "You and your men have given great sacrifices for your country, and I'm proud to be among you," said Dolf Droge. The hawks, who are smart enough to know that they are "caught between our men and our patriotism," silently acknowledge that this is the only possible attitude, the best salve for their frustrations.

Only very gradually did the effects of the President's policies eat through the solid block of good will the Administration had built up with its special luncheons, honor guards, and other expressions of sympathy for the men and their families. "It took us a long time to realize that there is nothing in Vietnamization for the prisoners," said Jean Crumpler, a four-year POW wife.

Many prisoner families still don't agree, of course, but there is now some doubt as to where the center of gravity lies, some chance even that the Administration might have created a salient public issue that will backfire. The POWs have provided the doves with a semblance of a legitimate war aim—end the war to get the POWs back. Moreover, the prisoners are, for many voters, the most concrete evidence that the war is not over. They are not home, so the President has not yet kept his election promises. Nixon's grip on the prisoner issue, and on the prisoner families, has weakened, as the doves are now maneuvering around the Hanoi Hilton for leverage. If it is not clear whether the prisoners themselves are hawks or doves—whether they are cheering the air strikes, or, as Colonel Edison Miller is reported to be doing, reading the Pentagon Papers—it is equally unclear

which side they are helping in domestic politics.

The Common Solution

Frank Mankiewicz deals very smoothly with crowds, so he blanched only slightly and slid to the next question when he was attacked at the Friday night opening session. John B. Coker said that Mankiewicz's boss, George McGovern, is "a traitor to his country" because of his hypercritical statements about the President in time of war. A stern-looking, elderly man from a factory town in New Jersey, Mr. Coker arched his back several times during the convention in irritation over critics of the flag. When one caucus proclaimed itself a planning group only for non-supporters of the President, his neck veins flared and he vowed to "hold my ground until you throw me out bodily. My son's been a POW nearly six years, and I've got as much right to be here as you do." Rolling their eyes in resignation, the dovish POW relatives confessed that Coker was too much to handle.

But despite his reputation for two-fisted, snorting patriotism, John Coker's prescriptions for ending the war sounded almost exactly like those of George McGovern, if you could get him and his wife off in a quiet corner for a talk. "I think the President should say that we will withdraw and stop bombing if the North Vietnamese will show that they will give the POWs back and account for the missing," he said. "We should offer to get out totally and for good. I have never felt we basically belonged there."

High strategy was soon overwhelmed by more immediate family concerns. "My son was just 23 when he was shot down," said Mrs. Coker, "and all he ever wanted to do was be an officer in the U. S. Navy. He wrote us before getting captured that he found the war dirty, but that it was his duty. He was greatly concerned that the bombing be accurate, because he didn't want to kill people. I can tell you that. He followed orders mainly, and was a great one for believing in discipline, but he wanted that bombing to be accurate. . . ."

"I brought up five sons for Vietnam," she went on. "I believed, and was proud to send them. But if we were misled, God help the men who did it. . . . If the President has not gotten us out by the election, I'll vote for anyone else. My grandson's 15, and I don't want him to go."

The Cokers were fairly representative of a broad consensus among the POW-MIA families that the solution to the war lies somewhere around total U. S. withdrawal in exchange for the prisoners. This consensus ran underground like a vein of solid ore, usually obscured by the antagonisms and political differences that have grown up during the war's long history. The existence of this common solution in such dissimilar families seemed startling, even though both George McGovern for the doves and Richard Nixon for the hawks are hovering around it, the extremes closing in. Nixon claims to have offered the common solution to Hanoi in May, 1971, and Dolf Droge spent a healthy portion of Saturday night trying to show that the North Vietnamese will not accept a simple, total withdrawal in exchange for the prisoners. (*The New York Times* of February 6, 1972, quotes Xuan Thuy as saying, "Conditions are no longer favorable for ending the war by means of a complete military withdrawal alone.") The major difference between the two candidates is that Nixon apparently plans to keep bombing until Hanoi moves a little bit this way and jingles the keys to the POW cells, while McGovern proposes to fulfill the American part of the bargain first and then call for the prisoners.

Nixon Watch

Why then, if there is such convergence on withdrawal as the path out of the war and out of the French prisons, did the POW-MIA families go through all the upheaval and turmoil

trying to decide what to do? I think they ran up against a number of misgivings about whether withdrawal will work, and whether they can live with it if it does. These doubts made their acceptance of the common solution very volatile, as one scratch beneath the surface of the rational agreement could send the discussion back to the raucous blows of a 1966 debate. Since the doves I respected most shared these doubts, I took them as a sign that the end of the war might not bring the anticipated feeling of sheer moral release.

For many doves, the obvious problem with the common solution is that the President seems so far away from it—offering to withdraw and yet keeping his position hazy enough to have one foot in the original purposes of the war. Dovish families worried that President Nixon might be close enough to the common solution to win the election, but far enough from it personally to continue bombing afterward—to continue the hostilities that keep the prisoners in Hanoi. They don't want to risk the election at all, with the long, painful slide toward 1976, and so they have pushed the President desperately to clarify his position. But because they want Nixon himself to end the war before November, many of them are afraid to oppose him outright. Ironically, some of them applauded the blockade, announced the day after the convention ended. "I've felt hopeful so many times before," said one dovish wife, "but never as hopeful as now. I mean he's softened his terms. He's moved closer to what they might accept. And he's committed himself to decisive action to end the war, so he can't just drift along, which is what always scares me. It seems to me that the only decisive action he can really take is to move closer to getting out."

Only those who believe that Nixon is absolutely incapable of ending the war focus exclusively on electing a Democrat like McGovern. These people, representatives of the peace movement in the League, often seemed rakishly impolitic and out of touch at the meeting, as when Sheila Cronin, a POW sister and active McGovern worker, lectured the audience: "If you persist in supporting the President, you must accept the sad fact that you, yes you, are as responsible for the deaths of your men as their captors." An interesting point for classroom discussion, perhaps, but such themes sent the families up the wall repeatedly.

Most of the POW relatives believed Nixon is perfectly able to end the war if he really needs to—that he could, for example, announce in August or September how diplomatic sources indicated his "decisive" blockade would force Hanoi off their line that withdrawal is not enough. He could add that the success of Vietnamization enabled the U. S. to offer the North Vietnamese total American withdrawal in exchange for the prisoners. His "last step for peace" would be to stop the bombing while North Vietnam decided whether to accept the common solution. By offering pure peace terms while touting his blockade like a hawk, Nixon might have the North Vietnamese and the Democrats checkmated on the war. Most of the non-Nixon supporters in the League would like to see that happen on such terms.

Two Strange Exiles

Although most of the families would, on balance, accept a successful withdrawal in exchange for the prisoners, many were still shaken by being brought face to face with assessing the final sacrifices of the war—weighing them against peace provisions that show nothing but withdrawal for all the deaths and all the missing years in Hanoi.

There is still great resistance to the common solution in President Nixon and others, who feel strongly that we cannot end the war on terms that do not honor the sacrifices of the POWs and of those who served and died. Similarly, the President says we can-

not, until the war is ended, grant amnesty to those who fled the country rather than serve, since to do so would also be unfair to the dead. So, ironically, both the POWs and the draft resisters in Canada and Sweden remain exiles because of the same ideas—that there is such a thing as fairness to the dead instead of to the living, that sacrifices can attain honor after they are made, that a war can be made honorable in the absence of strong national belief in it. After building a country by taking in political exiles from all over the globe, we have sent the first batch of our own people abroad over Vietnam—a troupe of its supporters and a troupe of its opponents—and they will stay exiles while we fight to make the war honorable. Even when most people now feel that Vietnam was not worth the sacrifice of one life, we feel driven to honor the dreadful number of exiles by adding to that number. This will seemingly go on until we can live with the war as it has been—something which has had both ideals and support at times, but which most people would like not to have started and which some have found grotesque.

"Sure the issue of sacrifices is hard," said Jane Denton, whose husband is entering his eighth year in Hanoi. "Nothing about this is easy. We just did what we were called upon to do, and I believed it was a noble cause for as long as I could. I don't need anybody to tell me what it was all for, because I remember all the feelings we have had. I don't think the sacrifice will bother us that much. Our heart's breaking over this war. How long do you go on killing, trying to justify the suffering of the people who went there before?"

Some League members feared the common solution, thinking we would keep withdrawing down to nothing and then be rebuffed when we asked for the prisoners. "We've got to stop somewhere and tell Hanoi, 'no more withdrawal until you show that we'll get the POWs back,'" said Robert Brudno, a graduate student at Wharton who assumed a role of statesman-analyst. "I don't think simple withdrawal will work. What's going to happen if McGovern says he's going to get out in 39 days, and then the North Vietnamese up the ante for the POWs? He says he will use all means necessary, including military, to get them back, but I find that hard to believe. Would he resume bombing? I think the North Vietnamese will extract every ounce of blood they can from the POWs, and then they'll start rolling out the MIAs. Why should they fight and give up even more lives to take South Vietnam when they have so much leverage over us? McGovern says that they will give them back because it will be in their self-interest, but it's in their interest to get the best possible deal. McGovern's plan to get back the POWs is almost as vague as Nixon's plan to end the war."

Only 1,600 Men

Among the most remarkable of the dove families, there was an anxiety about how we end the war, the morality of our disengagement, that seemed a product of the special, late kind of antiwar sentiment among military people. You have to take notice when a POW wife wants to end the war regardless of the prisoners—when such a woman also worries about taking off in the helicopter when the scared South Vietnamese we have recruited are scrambling to get aboard. She was worried about what we would leave behind, thinking it almost as foolish to count on ending our involvement by getting out of the war as it was to send thousands of military advisors hoping not to get involved.

This old fear of South Vietnamese collapse is a familiar hawk concern that becomes troublesome when you consider the South Vietnamese who would be politically vulnerable because of stands they have taken under U. S. pressure or encouragement. But in a way it is not so much the failures of Vietnamization that make you stop and think as the successes—all the

South Vietnamese in the army who have been trained and will fight and pay for it if they lose. Our policy of giving the South Vietnamese "a fighting chance" may then mean that we maximize the number of Vietnamese who will kill each other if we ever stop bombing. With seven years of artillery and 20 million bomb craters, we will have evened up the sides in somebody else's war, and then we will head for the sidelines like the oddsmaker at a cock fight.

North Vietnam will probably win eventually after we leave South Vietnam, and those of us who are veteran doves will whisper a secret cheer. But it should sour in the realization that we have forced commitments and given help to make the future war more bloody. It is much too much an article of faith among doves that the army in the South is a joke, that the war rides wholly on our B-52s, that South Vietnam will fold up of advanced decay as soon as we leave. Doves don't like reading newspaper stories about South Vietnamese military victories now, and such stories will cause a shudder after we have withdrawn. Antiwar people have a need to feel that Hanoi will win easily when we leave (which is why they won't need the POWs as hostages), and that the North Vietnamese cause is basically a just one.

Looking ahead to the time when the U. S. is out of Indochina, POW doves doubt both these feelings. They make you think that it has always been the American presence in Vietnam that has defined the war for most doves (and to some extent for the Vietnamese), and that it will be hard to know what to think of the war in Vietnam after we have left. The war will return to the morass it was before the artillery and the draft calls, the defiant and mechanical American war, turned the doubts about Vietnam into a screaming madness. While we are still killing there, withdrawal looks white as snow. Yet I think some of the POW families have a premonition that when we take this best of courses, we will find it hard to live with what we left. We will go back to the war's beginning, to North Vietnam's war of revolutionary national unity. (The idea of national unity actually has little or no inherent ethical appeal—either for Richard Nixon, Abe Lincoln, or for the North Vietnamese. In the abstract, you can make a pretty good case for honest secessionism, as in Biafra or Bangladesh.)

When the POW families look ahead, past the 300 sorties that now spill death every day, they do take you back to the war's beginning—to about 1964, with the clock running backwards. All the confusion of the early days bubbles up. They feverishly want the common solution to work—the war to end and the men to come home—and yet there is still something sour about it to them. They are wound tight around the prospect of withdrawal, dying for it and hating it. The little explosions of debate during the League meeting were emotional rather than logical, but the feelings are still there.

Meanwhile, the POW families are denied the partial joy of having the war end and the men return, and they are caught in a political cross fire between the hawks and doves. "We are the most used group of people in the country," lamented one wife. "Our husbands were used to fight the war, and we have been used as a reason to keep fighting. Now we are being used as a reason to get out of the war, but the men are still there." The hawks have used the POWs by caring about them while acting against their interests. The doves have acted in their interests while generally not caring about them. In the midst of all this pain and paradox, you can allow the POW families a little self pity. And you can only marvel at those who manage to look past their own husbands and sons to search for answers to the larger issues of Vietnam. "After all," said a wife, "the POWs are only 1,600 men, and this is a big, horrible war."■