

Repatriation of POWs will be very difficult

WASHINGTON — In his renomination acceptance speech at Miami Beach, President Nixon vowed he "will never abandon our prisoners of war" in Indochina. Yet Mr. Nixon did not say how he hopes to obtain the repatriation of these Americans short of ending the war on Hanoi's terms, which he

Two-thirds of the 2,587 French returnees — and 69 per cent of the Legionnaires (mostly Germans, with a smattering of Spaniards, Belgians and Italians) — required hospitalization.

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asserts with equal vehemence he will never do.

At least two of these men — Air Force Capt. Floyd Thompson and Navy Lt. Everett Alvarez Jr. — have been in captivity for more than eight years. Their America, that 1964 America which is the only one which lives for them, now seems almost as remote to most of us as the Great Depression.

Salivating Vassar girls

In 1964, middle-aged Vassar girls were salivating over Mary McCarthy's novel, "The Group." "Mary Poppins" and "My Fair Lady" were the big movie hits, Casey Stengel was piloting his Magnificent Mets to their third consecutive tenth-place finish in the National League, Spiro Agnew was teaching law at night school and the press no longer had Richard Nixon to kick around.

As of July 29, 1972, the Defense Department listed 1,086 men missing in action in Indochina and 518 in POW camps, 409 of whom are believed to be in North Vietnam. About 300 of these have been missing or in POW camps for periods of more than four years.

Despite the reassurances of that peripatetic former attorney general, Ramsey Clark, who based his statement that the POWs are in better health than he on interviews with 10 men, there is cause for grave concern about the health and emotional stability of the captives.

Some never returned

According to the late Bernard Fall, 36,979 soldiers and airmen — French, North African, Foreign Legionnaires, Africans and Vietnamese — were listed as missing or captured during France's nine-year war with the Communists. Of these, less than a third (10,754) were repatriated after the cease-fire agreement of July 20, 1954. Some of the missing 14,000 Vietnamese colonial troops who never returned may have been impressed into the Communist forces. The rest — and nearly 4,000 French and more than 3,000 Legionnaires — either were killed or died in captivity (Hanoi claims only 20 Americans have died in POW camps).

While the conditions under which American POWs are confined unquestionably are better than those which faced the French Union forces from 1945 until 1954, it is clear that many of the POWs will need medical attention when and if they are repatriated.

Loss of weight

According to Air Force Col. Norris Overly, who was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967 and released a year later (Hanoi has repatriated only nine POWs, the last in 1970), the North Vietnamese "have on occasion tortured some of our men." Almost all have suffered weight loss. Overly and the other returnees, like the French in 1954, are reluctant to comment publicly on their treatment by the North Vietnamese and for the same reason: They fear reprisals against their comrades still in Communist hands.

Even if the American POWs were released tomorrow, it would be weeks if not months before any of them could return to normal life. Some of them may never make the readjustment.

Prisoners' syndrome

Repatriated prisoners of war who have suffered long periods of close confinement suffer from what psychiatrists call "concentration camp syndrome." The symptoms of this syndrome include increased fatigue, mental anxiety, restlessness, impairment of memory, emotional instability, inability to sleep, decreased self-esteem, loss of initiative, irritability, difficulty in concentrating and dizziness. Not all suffer from each symptom or to the same degree, of course.

To assist the POWs to adapt to their new conditions after their release, a joint State Department-Defense Department program under the direction of Assistant Secretary of Defense G. Warren Nutter has been established. The POWs will be flown to military hospitals in the Philippines and Hawaii as the initial step in their convalescence. As soon as they are well enough to do so, they will be flown to the military hospitals closest to their home towns, where they will be able to see their families and begin the long and painful problem of readjustment to an America which will seem as strange to some of them as a foreign land.

They will need help

For Thompson and Alvarez — who have never heard of Women's Lib or Judge G. Harrold Carswell — this America, our America, may seem more than slightly bizarre. They will need all the help their families and friends can give them.

But the more immediate problem, of course, is how to effect the release of these men. Sen. McGovern, the Democratic presidential contender, would simply give the North Vietnamese everything they want and then beg for the POWs' return. That's not much of a plan. If he has a better one, Mr. Nixon has yet to reveal it.