

# The POW Issue: Plenty of Blame for All

By Robert J. Brudno

TO THE FAMILIES of American prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action, the recent upsurge of concern voiced by Senator McGovern and anti-war activists smacks of opportunism in light of years of silence on the POW issue. The Democratic nominee symbolizes those who in their crusade for an end to the war turned a deaf ear to the pleadings of their families to act to ensure that the prisoners remain alive and sane until a peace settlement can be reached.

For years the POWs were a non-issue. The senator attacked U.S. policy yet left North Vietnam's treatment of the prisoners unchallenged. What evolved is the basic article of anti-war faith: Thou shalt not criticize Hanoi.

Americans have languished for years in captivity deprived of any communication with their wives while anti-war leaders trooped to Hanoi to visit select prisoners and praise Hanoi's decency to the world press. Desperate mothers and wives have

*The writer is a brother of a POW who has been a prisoner for 8 years and a member of the National League of Families of POWs and MIAs in Southeast Asia.*

been told by peace groups that mail would come if they demonstrated against the war. In spite of the humanitarian nature of the issue, Senator McGovern and so many others voiced no public concern then, perhaps out of fear of joining the hawks on any war-related issue.

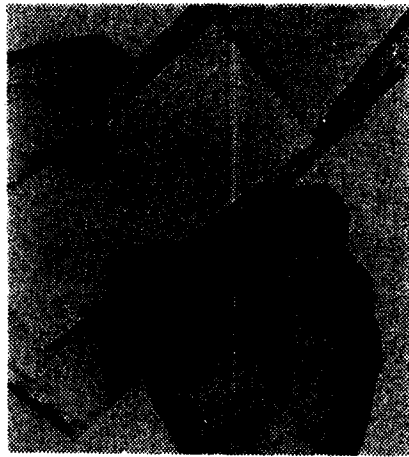
Freed from the constraints of the Johnson administration's no-publicity policy, family members broke silence and cried out for mail, lists, or any information on their men. Attempts to get liberal congressmen such as the senator to join this movement failed. The frequently criticized ties with the administration and conservatives grew out of necessity, because they always cared.

The result of the publicity was 2,000 letters in 1970, many from men held for many years but never known to be alive. The cause and effect relationship between public outcry and prisoner communication was established.

In 1971, however, interest in prisoner treatment waned. The half-time ceremonies

and letter writing campaigns were mocked by anti-war leaders who advised wives to direct their efforts against the administration. Meanwhile, Senator McGovern had taken up the issue but scrupulously avoided public criticism of Hanoi.

In February 1971 the mail stopped completely. It was only after the families themselves literally took to the streets that Hanoi responded in December 1971. In late December and early January 1972 over 1,000 letters



*They were silent . . . when hundreds of packages mailed to the men in August and October of 1971 were quietly returned to the senders. By April of this year mail from many of the POWs was stopped completely."*

from POWs were received, though only 18 from the hundreds believed alive in Laos, South Vietnam, and Cambodia. U.S. peace groups cheerfully displayed the mail to the press. They were silent later that month, however, when unknown to the public hundreds of packages mailed to the men in August and October of 1971 were quietly returned to their senders. By April of this year mail from many of the POWs was stopped completely.

The senator has also been silent when American prisoners have been used for ob-

viously political purposes. Ramsey Clark visited 10 "representative" prisoners, but 8 had not seen more than 8 months of captivity. Prisoners held since 1965 have never been interviewed nor have the hundreds of others now in Laotian caves or Vietcong cages. This writer cannot comprehend how it is that demanding to know who is alive and who is dead will jeopardize the Democrats' anti-war efforts.

Families of American prisoners and missing will always be bitter about Senator McGovern's failure to challenge this cruel game. He was not at their sides when anti-war zealots told prisoner wives that their husbands were "getting what they deserved." How easy it is to avoid responsibility for sending servicemen into combat.

In sum, it seems clear that if the senator chooses to pursue the POW issue he must consider humanitarian matters even if they do not directly support his pullout plans and offend some of his followers:

- Over 1100 Americans have disappeared in Southeast Asia; a mere list would end the doubt.
- If Hanoi's treatment is so humane, why does she refuse to allow an impartial third-party or Red Cross inspection of all camps.
- Mail, the only thing which will help keep the prisoners sane, continues to be a vicious tool of Hanoi and a non-existent privilege for many.

Calling for an end to the war is not enough, for it has done little to ensure the survivability of the men he seeks to rescue.

Sadly, the damage has already been done. Even if the senator were elected and brought an end to the war, hundreds of American servicemen will not come home. Their wives, who have waited helplessly for 5, 6, and 7 years, will be crushed by the realization that their men had died long ago; they could have begun new lives. As if they were somehow responsible for this terrible war, both sides have exploited her tragedy. Their years of anguish really accomplished nothing — for them, their country, or even Hanoi.

The anti-war movement never strained itself to prevent this; perhaps they should share the responsibility.