

Prisoners Of the Past

By JAMES RESTON

The Communist leaders in Hanoi keep on misjudging American public opinion. They seem to believe that if they release three U.S. prisoners to antiwar and anti-Nixon propagandists, while holding on to the other prisoners, the American people will be impressed by their generosity and turn to George McGovern in the election as a way to end the war and bring all the American prisoners home.

Even from the Communist point of view, this is undoubtedly wrong on several counts. First, the three released prisoners will not all agree to follow the Communist propaganda line when they come home. Second, releasing a few prisoners to critics of the President and supporters of Senator McGovern is obviously an interference in the American election if not actually a form of blackmail, which hurts both McGovern and Hanoi.

It is true that the Communist leaders in Hanoi are doing what most governments do with prisoners of war. They are holding on to them and trying to use them to force the President to accept Hanoi's terms of peace. But in the present conditions of the war and American politics and public opinion, both their assumptions and their tactics are embittering the people they are trying to persuade.

To begin with, they seem to be trifling with the sorrow and tragedy of the families of the prisoners left behind. Second, they assume that releasing a few prisoners to antiwar American activists and holding the rest will help their cause, put pressure on the President to settle the war on their terms, and promote Senator McGovern's election in November.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The American prisoners in Hanoi could influence the peace terms and maybe even the American election, but only if Hanoi released them all, not to antiwar activists, but to their families.

The Communist leaders cannot use

They cannot win support from the American voters or help McGovern by releasing their prisoners to the President's critics. But if they turned all the prisoners over to the wives, parents and children of the captive Americans, how could President Nixon explain to the American people that it was necessary to carry on the war and the most savage bombing of the century?

This is the point Henry Kissinger has been trying to make to the Communist leaders in his private talks with Le Duc Tho in Paris. He has been trying to tell them that their efforts to manipulate the American prisoners won't work, won't defeat President Nixon in November, but merely give Mr. Nixon a mandate to carry on the war in his second term.

Kissinger made the same point in his missions to Moscow and Peking, and the Soviets and the Chinese, who support Hanoi but need an accommodation with Washington, have worked quietly for compromise. But Hanoi is not listening, even to Moscow or Peking. It is making the same mistake about America that Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon made about North Vietnam in the last few years. It thinks the United States will collapse under pressure, just as the last three American Presidents thought North Vietnam would collapse when we sent our men and bombers into the battle, but Washington's assumptions in the past didn't work out that way, and Hanoi's assumptions now are not working out either.

Hanoi is still thinking that McGovern may win the Presidency in Washington, and Washington is still hoping that General Thieu will somehow retain the Presidency in Saigon, and hold South Vietnam together, but the odds are against it both ways.

Accordingly, sometime, and hopefully before the American Presidential election in November, both sides are going to have to compromise in the peace talks at Paris. Hanoi is not going to win by using the prisoners to help McGovern, and Washington is not going to win by insisting that General Thieu must retain power in Saigon.

The longer Hanoi holds on to the American prisoners, and the longer Washington insists on supporting General Thieu, the longer the war is likely to go on, and this will only increase the tragedy for everybody concerned. They are all prisoners now, not only the three Americans who have come home, and the prisoners left behind, but the governments in Hanoi and Washington, who are still