

"Make Diplomacy, Not War"

Prisoners of War—Hanoi's Strategic Weapon

WHEN it was first hinted that three American POWs were to be released by Hanoi and delivered to the United States under the wing of some strident doves, the Administration voiced concern that the

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freed prisoners, and presumably those still held, would be "exploited." Administration spokesmen were right, of course. But they might have gone on to point out that the POWs have been exploited for many years—by the North Vietnamese and by Americans including some holding or aspiring to public office.

The prisoner-of-war issue has been so obfuscated by peaceniks, warniks and just plain busy-bodies that it might be well to rehearse a few simple, if gruesome, facts. There are now at least 383 and perhaps as many as 425 American servicemen in North Vietnamese prison camps. (The lower figure is Hanoi's, the higher estimate is the Pentagon's.) The first of these was taken prisoner during the Tonkin Gulf incident on August 5, 1964 (He is reportedly alive and well in a camp near Hanoi). Since then, Hanoi has released twelve men. At least 25 and perhaps as many as 106 Americans are prisoners of the National Liberation Front. (The lower figure is the Front's, the higher is the Pentagon's.) The first American was taken by the Front on March 26, 1964; since then, 24 have been released. There are also a few men listed as captured in Laos and some 50 American civilians believed captured in South Vietnam.

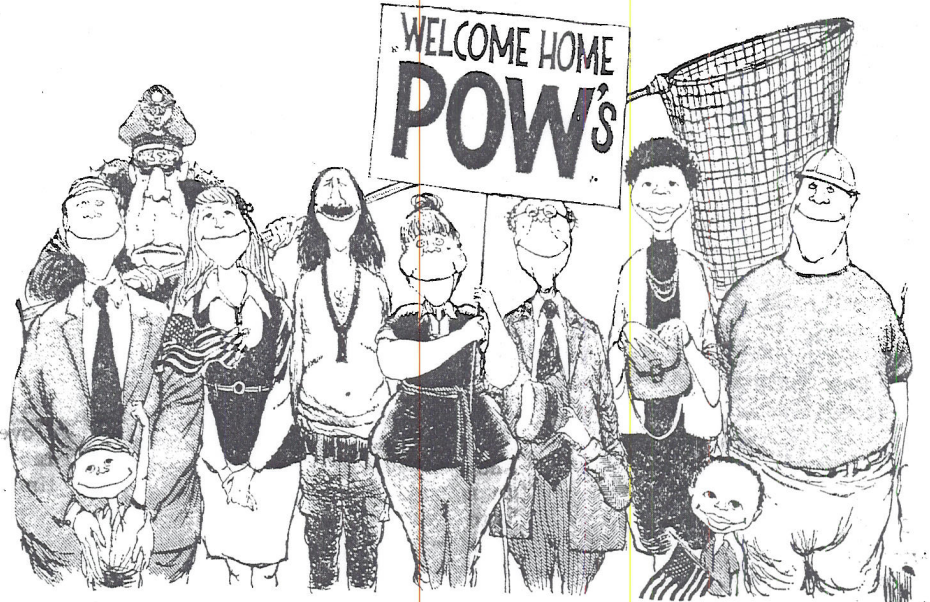
NEVER BEFORE in America's war-time history have prisoners occupied such a central role in the press, in military policy, in diplomacy and in domestic politics. This is all the more curious since their number is so few—possibly as low as 500 men out of more than two million men who have seen service in the Vietnam War. Why is this? In part, of course, it is because of deep-felt compassion for men who have been in captivity longer than the Civil War, longer than the Korean War, longer than World Wars I and II combined. But in part it stems from the fact that the POWs stain the consciences of those on both poles of the public opinion spectrum—we haven't been able to win and we haven't been able to make peace.

By Chester Cooper

Perhaps as much as any factor, however, the highly vocal concern that surrounds the plight of the POWs flows from the uncertainty that clouds almost every facet of their situation. There is, as we have already observed, no reliable record of the identity or

better hand than they thought they had as they faced the long, tough process of negotiation that was then just beginning. By early 1967, the State Department had already begun to worry about Hanoi using the POWs as a potent bargaining counter.

Much of what has been said and done with respect to the POWs during the last six



even the number of prisoners; some American families have suffered for years not knowing whether a son or husband was dead or is, in fact, imprisoned. Reports vary widely as to whether the prisoners are treated well or inhumanely. Mail is slow and erratic. There is no assurance that packages of food or medicines will reach the intended recipient. All of this, because both the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front have failed or refused to apply the terms of the Geneva Conventions with respect to prisoners of war and have prevented International Red Cross representatives from being stationed in or even visiting the prison camps.

Efforts of the United States and of well-disposed other nations to substitute the force of international public opinion for Geneva Convention guarantees may have had some effect in improving the lot of the prisoners, but none outside North Vietnam knows for sure. We do know that in late

1966 the North Vietnamese dropped their threat to place captured American pilots on trial as war criminals in the face of an international outcry organized through the efforts of Ambassador Harriman and Frank Sieverts of the Department of State. One unanticipated effect of this successful effort may have been to convince Hanoi's leaders that their American prisoners gave them a

years has been inevitable considering the American character and current mood. But we must acknowledge that our posture and our policy could only have encouraged Hanoi to use its trump cards to increase the stakes of the game.

IT IS THUS NAIVE to assume, in the light of the obvious importance we attach to the return of our prisoners, that the North Vietnamese will agree to a political settlement that falls significantly short of meeting Hanoi's maximum demands. And it is naive to believe that American POWs will be freed before a final political settlement. H. Ross Perot cannot buy them out, Jimmy Hoffa (now there is "exploitation") cannot con them out, Dave Dellinger cannot sweet-talk them out, and as sure as sure can be, the Air Force and the Navy cannot bomb them out. When the POWs are home free it will be because a few skilled patient diplomats, as part of a larger settlement package, have negotiated them out.

There are many costs to be weighed in a decision to go to war. There will be dead and permanently maimed, there will be domestic strains, there will be international tensions, there will be mounting budgets—and there will be prisoners. Unless a nation is ready to accept and discount these costs, it had best make diplomacy, not war. When the rhetoric is stripped away from the text of the eventual, peace settlement, one may discover that, in effect, we had fought the war in Vietnam for the purpose of freeing our prisoners of war. Alice in Wonderland and Catch-22, move over.

"POWs never have a nice day," the bumper stickers remind us. But forty thousand new Gold Star mothers don't have nice days either; nor do the men in some of the wards of Walter Reed Hospital. The people of Hanoi haven't had a nice day in a long time; nor, for that matter, have the people of Saigon. Nice days are rare in a country caught up in a seemingly-interminable war. Nice days come when a country is at peace.