

# A War That Changed the Presidency

TIME Washington Bureau Chief Hugh Sidey has watched three Presidents agonize over the Viet Nam War. Now that the agony may be coming to an end, he reminisces about the individual styles and policies of the three men, and offers some observations on the effects of the war on the presidency:

AS pickets marched before the White House, chanting demands that Richard Nixon sign a peace agreement immediately—in perhaps the last sacrament of the sidewalk institution of protest—the dusk slowly faded and an autumn moon rose over the Executive Mansion. The White House lights came on in melancholy beauty, highlighting a glistening new coat of paint applied for the Inauguration of the next President, whose term will embrace the bicentennial celebration of the Republic. Maybe tranquillity of one kind or another is to be the reward for two centuries of survival. But life will be different in the old mansion, with its understated elegance. The presidency has been stretched and tormented in the long decade of the Viet Nam War. It has suffered a dramatic decline in respect, yet perhaps it has gained some new wisdom too. It is more powerful than ever, more feared than ever, and at the same time it has revealed its human dimensions more than ever. Some of the mysticism has vanished. Americans need leadership as much as ever, but they may never again respect the presidency as much as they used to, finding that they have been brought so close to it by war and its internal ferment. Still, they may understand it better. If they do not give it the old trust and support, they may at least reduce their expectations about what one human being can do in the Oval Office.

Indeed, the whole story of Viet Nam and U.S. Presidents is a human one. The memories march out now as hope rises that the long war is ending. There were evenings that John Kennedy used to anguish about Viet Nam. He was one part the Irishman who wanted to show the flag and another part the scholar who remembered reverently when he had gone to see the ailing Douglas MacArthur and the old general had told him never to get involved in a war on mainland Asia. Kennedy bleated and complained about the news stories out of Viet Nam that ran counter to the cheery calculations of Robert McNamara's Pentagon computers and the bravado of the gen-

erals. But he was always tugged by reason and maybe, just maybe, had he lived to face the crunch he might have overwhelmed his gut, which said fight, and gone by his head, which suggested that Communists were not as bad as they used to be and, besides, wars on mainland Asia were not an American calling.

Lyndon Johnson lived by his gut, and it told him to fight. We rode those airplanes in the campaign of 1964 as he inhaled his Cutty Sark Scotch and thumped our chests and squeezed our knees and vowed that he wasn't about to send American troops to fight Asian battles. We discovered the "Alamo syndrome" later, the unalterable cast of L.B.J.'s character that made him go through life like Davy Crockett or Matt Dillon, never backing from a dare, nev-

DON CARL STEFFEN



WESTMORELAND & JOHNSON IN VIET NAM (1968)  
The ghost of Teddy Roosevelt.

er going into a fight he didn't intend to win. We were spirited out of the American embassy in the Philippines one incredible day in 1966, locked up at a naval airbase and flown into Viet Nam to await the arrival of the President on his first visit to the "front." He came dressed in his cowboy brown twill, looking 10 ft. tall and with the presidential seal on his jacket over his heart.

In a strange way on that strange day, there was pride in the air. A beleaguered President, doing what he conceived to be right, had come to see the best men America had on the battlefield. The tragedy of the war was washed away from those few hours. Johnson went through the hospitals, sat in the mess hall with boys who had been in foxholes a few hours earlier. Then, in a sweltering room of the officers' club, he

looked proudly at his field commanders and heard the ghost of Teddy Roosevelt calling him and he told them to come home and put the coonskin on the wall. More troops. More bombs. But no coonskin. The result was that Sunday night in 1968 when Lyndon Johnson announced an end to the bombing of North Viet Nam and an end to his political career.

The great peace marches were in Nixon's time. Nixon was a lonely figure, preferring at first to watch the football games, remote, disdainful, vague in his promises for peace. Yet Nixon's story of Viet Nam is largely untold. It is bottled up in this singular man who brooded alone at Camp David and with his yellow legal pad sat endless hours with Henry Kissinger, balancing all the forces facing him, both political and military. We watched from the outside as the inexorable march to the boats began for American troops, and predictions of disaster were too numerous to count.

There were even days when perhaps discouragement penetrated Nixon's outer tenacity. We sat in Kissinger's high-windowed office only 50 yards from hordes of peace marchers shouting obscenities and heard the professor say quietly: "In the end, Viet Nam may destroy everyone who touches it." After the Cambodian invasion, Nixon took his walk at dawn along the mall among the youthful invaders, talking about his travels to foreign lands and college football teams. Then he went off to the Mayflower Hotel for scrambled eggs, strangely rejuvenated.

Still the troops came out, but not with a whimper. Nixon applied muscle. From the secret musings came not only the orders for the Cambodian invasion but for the excursion into Laos and then the ultimate shock, the mining of Haiphong Harbor and the renewed heavy bombing of the North. They are all ingredients of the impending peace no less astonishing today than when they happened. Then there was Peking and the mind-boggling view of Nixon raising his glass to Chou En-lai, a part of the Viet Nam equation, and the scene just a few months later of Nixon eating his bowl of cereal in the Kremlin as he examined yet another pressure point to bring the war to its close.

When Henry Kissinger came to the White House press room to tell what was happening in the negotiations and proclaim "Peace is at hand," the weight of these long years was behind him and no doubt gave his voice its unusual gravity. Photographers and reporters pushed and shoved and strained to see and hear in the overcrowded and overheated room. It was as it had been for ten years, but yet it wasn't. Many in the press had witnessed the whole decade and seen all of the actors in the drama. Though conditioned to deception, hardened to failure, they rushed to the phones to flash the news with a note of exuberance never heard before.

# Operation Egress Recap

**T**HERE are 537 of them according to the official lists—the American prisoners of war, confined in an unknown number of detention camps somewhere in Indochina. More than half of them are airmen, downed during the long bombing campaign; over 50 are civilians, trapped while out on patrol. One of them, Lieut. (j.g.) Everett Alvarez, now 34, was shot down fully eight years ago; others, still unidentified, may have been seized during the past few weeks. In the 60 days after the impending truce settlement, they will all begin their voyage home.

Their families are jubilant, but the jubilation is not unmixed with concern. "It's actually a little frightening," says Carol North, of Wellfleet, Mass., whose husband Lieut. Colonel Kenneth North was shot down more than six years ago. "When he left, our eldest daughter was 10. Now she's getting ready to apply for college. The transition is bound to be difficult. There will be a lot of adjustment for everyone."

"These men will be suffering from future shock as well as culture shock," says Eileen Cormier, 36, who became a school librarian on Long Island to support her four children in the seven years since her husband Arthur was captured. During the long captivity, the commonplaces of life have changed—there are easier abortion laws, widespread color television, the success of *Hair*, and Spiro Agnew has become a household word. "It will almost be like a Martian dropping in," says Mrs. Cormier. "I don't know how he's going to feel. Who helps me if he starts crying or screaming?"

To deal with such problems, and to avoid the recriminations that surrounded the prisoner exchanges at the end of the Korean War, the Pentagon has devised a program with the elaborate and somewhat mysterious name of Operation Egress Recap. (Possibly a combination of the prisoners' "egress" from North Viet Nam and their "recapture"

by the U.S., though Washington spokesmen profess uncertainty as to what the terms actually mean.) U.S. officials hope to bring out the prisoners by sending Air Force C-141 Medevac planes directly to Hanoi; more likely the Communists will fly the men to Laos or some other neutral point. There, Operation Egress Recap will begin.

For each known prisoner a tailored uniform has been provided, complete with medals and insignia of rank, to which in some cases the men were promoted while in prison. The reason for this, says the Pentagon, is that prisoners often tend to feel guilty and ashamed after they are freed, and a familiar uniform helps to reassure them. The uniforms have already been flown to the returnees' primary processing center in the hospital at Clark A.F.B. near Manila. There, too, a personnel brochure will be waiting for each man, listing such welcome information as pay records and savings accounts, plus personal messages from relatives and their recent photographs.

**Decision Makers.** Each prisoner will get a medical checkup to find out whether he is suffering from disease or serious malnutrition. Then there will be a quick debriefing for information about other captives. (One previously released prisoner brought out with him the names of 350 P.O.W.s he had memorized; he wanted to tick them off before he reached the confusing jangle of life in the U.S.) After that debriefing, released prisoners who are able to travel will spend longer periods in military hospitals closer to home. Each returnee will be accompanied by a military escort whose job it will be to help him make necessary decisions (studies have shown that men conditioned to the authoritarian life of a P.O.W. camp have difficulty starting to think for themselves again).

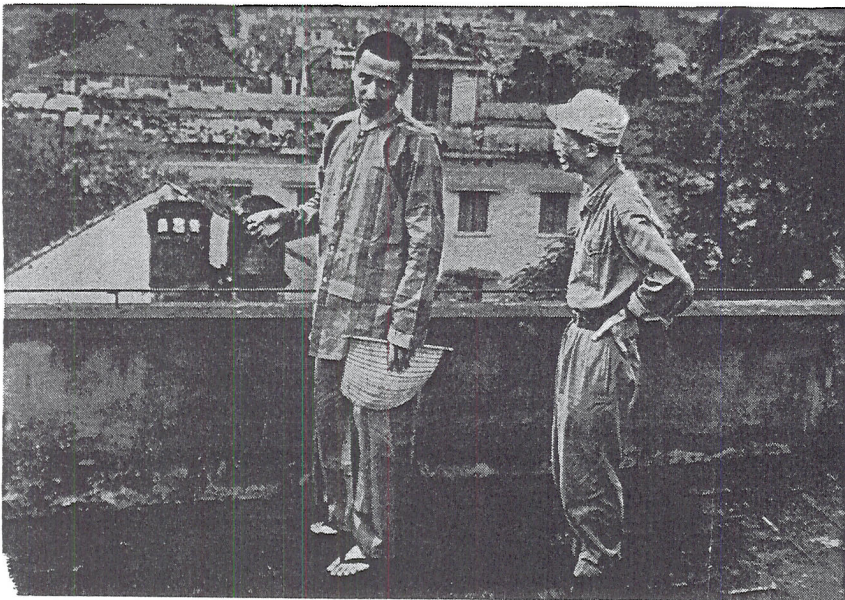
Hospital stays will vary, but the Pentagon generally expects the men to be in good condition, since North

Vietnamese prison life improved after the U.S. began complaining loudly of mistreatment in 1969. Part of the hospitalization will be taken up by psychological interviewing. "We have found," says Dr. Roger E. Shields, the Pentagon's expert on war prisoners, "that every man who returns from captivity urgently needs to tell his story, not publicly but privately, to someone who will listen to him with empathy and understanding."

Even with such physical and mental crutches, the transition will not be easy, either for released prisoners or for their families. Not only have P.O.W. wives had to run families and homes, but the life-style of women in general has shifted since many of the prisoners were captured. "These men were male chauvinists when they went in," says Mrs. Cormier. "So many things have changed. Can you imagine me going back to the local officers' club and doing knitting? No way!" Several P.O.W.s, including Lieut. Alvarez, have already been divorced *in absentia* by their despairing wives.

No matter how great the problems of readjustment, however, the return of the P.O.W.s highlights the crueler question of the 1,256 Americans listed as missing in action. Some wives and families have heard nothing definite since their men disappeared, and since the Viet Cong and other guerrilla forces have never issued complete prisoner lists, there is always the possibility that some of the lost have survived. Mrs. James White, 29, of St. Petersburg, Fla., wife of an Air Force lieutenant shot down over Laos in 1969, heard the news of a settlement last week and rushed out to buy new nightgowns and evening dresses for herself and a new dress for her daughter Katherine, 3½. But Sharon White is still trying not to let her hopes get out of control. "I can't get myself too high and then sink to a low," she says. Mrs. White has cleaned out half her bedroom closet for her husband. But she refuses to put any of his old clothes in it until she learns for certain that he is alive.

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RETURNING P.O.W. LIEUT. GARTLEY WELCOMED IN NEW YORK

