

# Returning prisoners need help from their government

NEW YORK — After the return of the prisoners from Vietnam, after all the consoling ceremonies at the White House, and the family reunions and tears on television, the reality for the prisoners coming home at

## James Reston

last will begin in private. "When the saints come marching home" from Vietnam, what will they find?

The rest of us will never really understand. Most of us in this big continental country never had a son or relation killed or maimed in Vietnam. America lost 46,000 dead, but for most of us, this was a statistic in the papers, and not a tragedy in the family or down the street.

For the liberated prisoners and their families, however, it is an intensely personal crisis. On the television, it looks like a reunion of lovers and families, but in reality, it is a reunion of strangers.

The prisoners come back different men, usually helpless or rebellious. They have had to surrender to endure. Many of them have literally been "killing time," which means killing their fears, blotting out the present, romanticizing the past, and dreaming of a family and an America that are changed beyond their imagining.

### A capricious incident

In the history of the Republic, the Vietnam war will probably look like a capricious incident, but the United States was already involved in it casually but carefully under President Eisenhower in 1953, 20 years ago, and much more deeply involved under President Kennedy in 1963. In family terms, this is a very long time.

The Census Bureau in Washington tells us that over half the people in the United States are now under 28. This means that most of our people cannot even remember much before we were involved in Vietnam. And in the lives of the prisoners now coming home, most of whom are under 25, Vietnam dominates everything.

They not only come home different men, but come home to the same but different and older wives, different children, and a different country, with different memories, and different values. After the reunion and the celebration, trying to sort all this out at home and in the community, is bound to be an agony.

### The least that can be done

The least that can be done for these returning prisoners is to see that they are given good jobs, and relieved of the personal anxiety of taking care of the security of their wives and the education of their children. But even this is not enough.

No doubt the communities they return to will see that they are employed, but after a few years it is easy to forget. So while the

President and the Congress are now celebrating the courage and endurance of the prisoners, maybe they should agree on a prisoners bill that would ensure the economic security of these families during the coming years, when they will still be struggling with the consequences of Vietnam, long after most people have forgotten.

### A symbol of the tragedy

After all, the prisoners amount to only a few hundred, and their sacrifice is not as great as the tens of thousands who were killed in the struggle, but they are a symbol of the tragedy of the Vietnam war, and the conscience of America and if the government is as sympathetic and grateful as it now says, maybe it should not only welcome them home but give them a chance for a secure economic future after the celebrations are over.

If the returning American prisoners are to be dealt with practically, and not merely politically or romantically, legislation must be introduced now, with the support of the President, and the leaders of the Congress, to relieve these families of their economic anxieties.

### Different values, styles

The government cannot wipe out their memories. The war has gone on too long and many of them have been in prison for too many years to regain a normal family life or readjust to the different values and styles of America while they were in prison.

Some of the prisoners will have been strengthened by sacrifice and adversity, and will come back to families ennobled by sorrow and fidelity, but others will be overwhelmed by remorse, and even the austere and faithful families may have trouble with their warward children.

For a returning prisoner to deal with all this, even in the best of circumstances, to help make decisions when for years he had no power of decision, to get to know himself at another time of life, and his wife, and his growing and transformed children — this is a challenge beyond the reach of most men.

### A chance to ease their burdens

Right now, however, when the President and the Congress are conscious of the returning prisoners' problems, there is at least a chance to ease his economic burdens in a time of inflation and unemployment, and give him time to think and sort things out.

Speeches of gratitude from the President, which are undoubtedly sincere, and homecoming celebrations and parades on Main Street, are not really enough. When they come home from Vietnam, these prisoners and their families need to be relieved for a time of economic worries to deal with their personal and family anxieties, and a government that speaks of "peace with honor" owes them a debt of honor, which so far has not been paid.