

# The Saddening Celebration



Arthur Hoppe

FOR THE past week the front pages have carried little else but the story of our returning prisoners of war.

Each day, I've glanced at the pictures of grinning young men and tearfully happy wives. And I've turned the page.

I don't want to read about it. "HERO'S WELCOME FOR FREED POWs," the headline says. I don't want to watch as the tiny figure on the television screen waves joyously from the steps of the airplane and then, through the electronic magic of Instant Re-Play, waves joyously once again.

I know this is the one happy moment of this long and ugly war. I know this is as close to a victory celebration as we'll ever have.

Yet I can't bring myself to share in the mood of national jubilation. I only feel sad.

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PARTLY, it is the 500 or so young men themselves. I'm glad they're finally coming home. I try to imagine what it would be like to spend eight years in a foreign prison camp. The poor bastards!

Yet it was we who sent them over there to be captured and confined. It was we who sent them to fight this long and ugly war because we could find no way out of the mess without admitting we were wrong.

They are living evidence of our guilt. They are, in a way, us. For we were all, as the peace pamphlets used to say, prisoners of the war.

And their happiness now is in direct ratio to the agony we put them through. Maybe this is true for the nation as a whole. Maybe this is the cause of our jubilation now. So when I see the joy in their faces that their agony is over, I turn the page. I flick off the set. I only feel sad.

The President has asked us to offer "a prayer of thanks for all who have borne

this battle." When he says that I don't think of our 500 prisoners. I think of those who bore far worse in this battle. But they are dead. More than a million of them. I can't thank them for dying. The poor bastards! I only feel sad.

The President says we must "resolve anew to be worthy of the sacrifices they have made." The sacrifices for what? The map of Vietnam is unchanged. The Viet Cong still hold their enclaves. A dictator still rules in Saigon. More than 145,000 North Vietnamese troops still remain in the south.

A decade of sacrifices. A million lives, a billion dollars, our own country torn apart. Yet nothing has changed. And I am asked to feel worthy of this. I only feel sad.

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BUT THAT is only part of it. It is mostly, I think, that I begrudge this long and ugly war even this one happy moment.

Its very ugliness and pointlessness, I had come to feel, was its only virtue. After a decade of this ugly and pointless war, the country had come to look upon it with revulsion. And I had hope that this revulsion would extend to any future war our leaders might want to embroil us in as they play their game of global strategy.

But how quickly we forget.

The President talks now of the "selflessness" of our cause, of "peace with honor," of noble "sacrifices." And now the nation's mood is one of jubilation as we celebrate what is fast becoming a famous victory in glorious battle.

So I glance away from the happy faces of these 500 young men. They are the symbols of this war. We should never have sent them over there. Now at last we have them back. They are the only fruits of our victory. And yet the nation celebrates.

How quickly we forget.

And that, I think, is perhaps the saddest thing of all.