

# Red Carpets And Other Hypocrisies

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By Tom Wicker

The American prisoners of war are coming home from captivity, some of them after as long as seven years, all 592 of them to heroes' welcome. President Nixon has remarked upon the good character required to withstand imprisonment, and has sought to insure the privacy of their family reunions. At Honolulu, a red carpet was spread for them. Each will be able to use a new Ford automobile for a year without cost. Official mourning for Presidents Truman and Johnson has been replaced by flags at full staff, representing official pleasure in the prisoners' return. The Pentagon reports that it has persuaded the nation's biggest employers to find jobs for former P.O.W.'s who choose to leave military service. Television and the newspapers breathlessly cover every stage of the return.

All this may be well-deserved, but like so many other developments of the war in Vietnam, it discloses a warped sense of priorities on the home front. In what way are these relatively few P.O.W.'s greater heroes than the 50,000 dead boys who came home in body bags, some of them with smuggled heroin obscenely concealed in their mangled flesh, most of them to obscure graves and public indifference?

And if it is argued that not much, after all, can be done to make amends to the dead, then in what way are the returning P.O.W.'s more to be honored and preferred than the 254,000 Vietnam-era veterans aged 20 to 29 who are unemployed in the richest nation on earth? By what standards do the released prisoners deserve so much honor of the Republic when at the end of 1972 only a few more than 20,000 of the estimated 60 to 100,000 drug-addicted Vietnam-era veterans

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were receiving or had received treatment for this "service-connected" disability?

As to drug addiction, in fact, the Veterans Administration programs available are limited basically to detoxification, with no provision for the kind of rehabilitation or retraining that might help a reformed addict stay off the habit. And in its fiscal 1974 budget, the Administration that

is making so much of the P.O.W.'s return, has proposed no increase in funds for treating drug-addicted veterans and is opposing a Senate bill that would provide rehabilitation and job placement services for these most tragic of the Vietnam veterans.

The unemployment picture — although it has recently improved somewhat — provides an equally strange example of relative values? Among Vietnam-era veterans 20 to 24 years of age, surely a crucial group, unemployment in January of this year was running at 8.6 per cent, about twice the general rate, and well above the 7.4 per cent rate for non-veterans aged 20 to 24. The society that is so joyfully welcoming the P.O.W.'s, moreover, permitted unemployment among black Vietnam-era veterans aged 20 to 24, another crucial group, to run at 9.5 per cent in the last quarter of 1972.

So far from rolling out red carpets for these unemployed veterans, the Administration proposes in the new budget to eliminate \$1 billion for public employment—of whose enrollees, nearly 40 per cent or about 61,000 are Vietnam-era veterans. A severe cut also has been proposed in vocational training under the Manpower Development and Training Act, for which another 40,000 Vietnam-era veterans are enrolled.

The Administration has never put into effect an educational program ordered by Congress that would provide \$300 additional per veteran enrolled to institutions that would carry out special programs for veterans, and another \$150 for each enrolled veteran who had not completed high school. Mr. Nixon vetoed last October a veterans' health care bill that would have provided funds to bring V.A. hospitals' staff-patient ratios up from less than 2 to 1 to the 2.7-to-1 average of other hospitals.

In fiscal 1971, an arbitrary cut from 84,000 to 79,000 in the average daily patient census—the equivalent of closing seventeen hospitals—was imposed on V.A. hospitals. Congressional action forced the average daily census back to about 82,000 but the fiscal 1974 budget proposes to reduce it again to 80,000.

Mr. Nixon did rescind a recent V.A. order that would have reduced disability payments to Vietnam-era veterans, and nothing could have been more appropriate in the week when the P.O.W.'s began coming home to popular acclaim; but staff members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee can cite numerous other examples of official and public reluctance to pay sufficient attention to the ordinary and unsung veterans who have been coming home all along.

So let us honor the P.O.W.'s and be glad their ordeal is ended; but let us remember also those who shall have borne the battle, those who need a new Ford less than a decent job, those for whom the only bracelet is a band of needle marks.