

Robert C. Maynard

Post 2/21/73

Return of the Prisoners: Script by the Military

When important news events involving deep human emotions occur, those of us who are witnesses gain an opportunity to identify with the principals and wonder how we might react under similar circumstances. In this age so dominated by the electronic eye and high-speed word transmitters we who are at a distance seem to witness at most obscure events.

For example, when the 163 POWs returned to Clark Air Force Base, they were like a strange, alien presence. Their return, it seemed, was a base for strange, unexplained things were exchanged. That is, the strange, unexplained things which had been debated in many places, including, I'd guess, the House of Representatives.

What is going on? The way we receive the news is not so much this institution, which the mass media may have influenced, the bounds of reporting, but rather the fact that the press was not a passive participant. The sound networks went to Clark Air Force Base and cameras dashed around to catch a glimpse of the movement. But those who were involved in the matter is that the return of the prisoners of war was a highly managed event down to the minutiae of the event.

Even so, it is clear that these were men who were capable of speaking for themselves. The entire event

*...the man
of the... in this
capacity... and
offers
in this space his own views on
the performance of the news
media in regard to this*

continued to be handled as if the 163 returnees had no mind of their own. If the military had stopped at that, it would have been questionable enough. But it is now beginning to emerge that the Air Force did its best to shut off the press from any independent reporting at Clark Air Force Base.

According to reporters on the scene, one written directive, posted on barracks bulletin boards, told personnel at Clark: "Don't talk to the press be-

cause they will distort everything you say." Besides, James Sterba of The New York Times has reported that even in cases where the returning prisoners requested an opportunity to speak with representatives of the hometown press, permission was denied.

We are thus provided with one framework in which to focus our empathy with persons isolated from any contact with their society for seven or eight years. They return to a society more surely programmed in "them-against-us" terms than the one they left. Even as the machinery for information makes it possible for us to see an event such as the return of prisoners live half way around the globe, the bases of concern are made more limited. We still don't know what these men actually experienced—only what the military wants us to know of their experience.

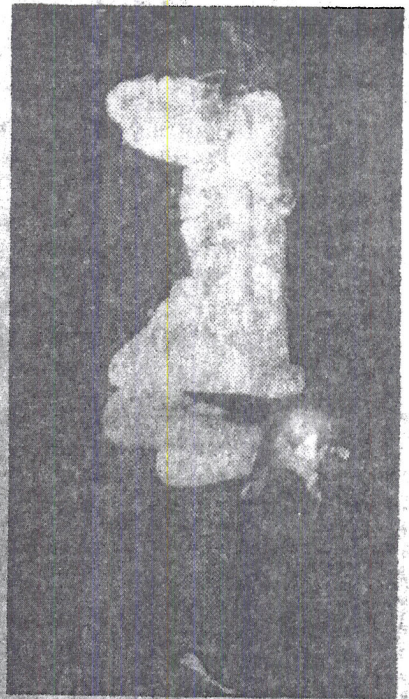
The consumers of information get to know what the returning prisoners can tell us after an armada of 20 military public relations agents briefed them first on how to communicate with their countrymen through the mass media. Not surprisingly, then, we received a number of poems to "honorable peace" and could only wonder how that very phrase happened to be among the first to pop out of the mouths of men in captivity for such long periods of time.

When it became clear that we were heading toward some settlement of enough of our disputes with North Vietnam as to allow for the return of prisoners, the Department of Defense prepared a booklet for the men. It was part of the large glut of material designed to help them catch up on the rapid changes in the time since they have been in foreign prisons.

The booklet tells them about the new hip language of "dude" and "right on" and brings them up to date on some of the major events of the past several years. But as I watched the militarily managed show unfold, I couldn't help wonder how they would be brought up to date on one of the fundamental issues of these times—the way we communicate with each other.

Perhaps, in the end, nobody really needed a primer on the subject of the relationship of the government and the press. The Department of Defense provided us all, prisoners and ordinary citizens alike, with an object lesson in what the issues are all about. If you start off believing that the press "will distort everything," then you have seri-

ously narrowed the options available for understanding what's going on.



Black Star Photo

Major Burer Returns

With that set of mind, it is not a "distortion" to provide returning prisoners with rough drafts of airport statements which praise an "honorable peace," but it would be a distortion to have candid give and take between the returnees and the press.

In the only interviews permitted at Clark Field, reporters were told beforehand that they could not ask the men any "controversial" questions. Those who need to catch up on how freedom and democracy are doing can look to the handling of the return of the prisoners by the military for some lessons in the act of news management, circa 1973.

Limited though we were in our access to any genuine information about how these men fared and what they really think about that, there was one spontaneous photographed instant that should win a prize. At Andrews Air Force base, when Maj. Arthur Burer returned, that spontaneous human response was when his wife and children broke military protocol and rushed across the tarmac to their man. The whole military honor guard arrangement disintegrated and human beings, in their frailty and their joy, took over. It is the lone photograph—with Mrs. Burer literally off the ground in exhilaration—that we can take away from this story as belonging to ordinary people, not to the managers.

* 20 FEB 73