

The P.O.W.'s: Focus of Division

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LOS ANGELES, March 1— For the last four years, the prisoners of war have played a leading role in the bitter national debate over Vietnam. And as they return from captivity, they remain the focus of deep and angry divisions that have not been obliterated by their homecoming. The prisoners are a "touchy subject" because even the most outspoken war critics feel sympathy for them as human beings and rejoice at their reunions with their families.

News Analysis

But when the issue changed from the personal to the political, when the prisoners made statements praising President Nixon and his policies—and when the President invoked their support of him—the lines of conflict were drawn again.

Across the country in the last two weeks, politicians, editorial writers and the prisoners themselves have been celebrating the cease-fire and echoing the words of Capt. Jeremiah Denton when he landed in the Philippines: "God bless America."

But to its critics, the Nixon Administration has "manipulated" the nation's "hunger for heroes" into a commercial for its own record, and the glorification of war itself. Dr. Robert J. Lifton, a professor of psychiatry at Yale and an expert on the problems of veterans, said:

"I'm pleased like everyone else that the prisoners are getting home. But what's disturbing is the image being created of simple, old-fashioned American military virtue, as though nothing had happened in Vietnam, and as though the understandable emotion around these men can wipe away 10 years of an ugly, unjust war."

Phrases Repeated

The prisoners have yet to speak fully about their experiences, and most of their public utterances have sounded as if they came from the same script; even military public relations experts have expressed embarrassment over the frequent repetition of phrases and ideas.

But a Pentagon spokesman flatly rejected today an suggestion that the prisoners had been "coached." And there is little doubt that the men meant what they said and that Col. Robinson Risner was sincere when he told a news conference: "I'm speaking for all of the men because we've dis-

cussed this many times. I would like to say that, as far as I know, every man that has been in prison in North Vietnam supports and has supported our President and his policies!"

The President did not intrude into the homecoming ceremonies, but several times he used the P.O.W. issue to re-assert the wisdom of his policies. As he told the families of the captured and the missing: "When others called on us to settle on any terms, you had the courage to stand for the right kind of peace. [You] never wavered and said, 'We want our men back but we want peace with honor for what they fought for.'"

Many P.O.W.'s clearly want to believe that the war ended honorably and that their sacrifice was worth it. At various news conferences in the last week, several of them suggested that the country should now unite in a flurry of patriotism and loyalty.

"This war has been very divisive for many years," said Capt. James Mulligan. "But I feel very strongly that it's about time the American people started pulling together. It's about time we started raising the flag instead of burning it." Another P.O.W. insisted: "I want you all to remember we walked out of Hanoi as winners."

Other former prisoners denounced the antiwar movement as the work of a "small minority" that had been a "source of strength" to North Vietnam and had thus prolonged their captivity.

It was a popular viewpoint. When the National Broadcasting Company televised an interview with a crippled veteran who said that his homecoming had not been as warm as the one afforded the P.O.W.'s, switchboards lit up with angry phone calls.

Pete Hamill drew a similarly hostile reaction when he wrote in The New York Post that most of the prisoners had "committed unlawful acts" by bombing an enemy in an underclared war.

'Litmus Test for Patriotism'

"You don't speak for all New Yorkers," said one letter writer, "a lot of us voted for Richard Nixon." A television newsman added: "Your response to the P.O.W.'s has become the litmus test for patriotism."

Even some supporters of the war, however, worry about the prisoners' statements. "It scares me in a way," said an official of the National League of Families of Prisoners of War and Missing in Action. "If the pris-

oners are not careful they will destroy their credibility. They've been away so long, they don't recognize the depth of division in this country. They're making too light of the antiwar movement, they don't give it the importance we all recognize it has."

Not all returnees put down the movement. Sgt. Gary Guggenbergers said he was devastated when Senator George McGovern was defeated, and explained: "I thought we were dead—that we'd never last it out." But most P.O.W.'s voiced complete support for the war, and as they listened to those returnees, many war critics echoed Dr. Lifton's concern that emotions were being managed for political ends.

"The last thing the Pentagon wants," wrote Professor Bernard wrote, a sociologist at the University of Southern California, "is the inevitable necessity of the public—via its surrogate, the press—confronting these men and discussing, in however imperfect form, the war they wasted their years upon."

What the war critics feel should be discussed is the real cost of the war in wasted lives and dollars. "Everyone wept when the families were reunited, it was a joyous occasion," said Cora Weiss, leader of the Committee of Liaison, an antiwar group devoted to

the P.O.W. issue. "But no one's weeping for the 55,000 boys who came home in green plastic body bags, or the 250,000 gusy in V.A. hospitals whose lives have been ruined. How many veterans are there whose heads are screwed up? No one has really knocked themselves out putting the whole thing in perspective."

Moreover, the critics say, the homecoming ignores the fact that most of the P.O.W.'s were professional pilots who were shot down while dropping bombs on a rather small and backward country.

"We are over-publicizing the war criminals who are coming home," said the Rev. Philip F. Berrigan, a leading antiwar activist. "But what else would you expect from the Government, but to distort the true nature of the men?"

The worst fear of the antiwar movement is that: the "manipulation" of the P.O.W. issue will erode two major lessons they feel have been taught by Vietnam. "The first is the nature of this war, what we have done, the mistakes we've made, the moral deterioration around the war," said Dr. Lifton.

"The second issue is the gradual change in consciousness of the American people," added the Yale professor. "This has to do with the questioning of this war, with questioning war in general, with questioning the military."

"To some extent, we're becoming more skeptical of the romantic images of war and military ventures. This kind of glorification of the P.O.W.'s, and the creation of heroes, can be a very harmful influence in undermining that hard-won wisdom."