

Poster

Between the Halves and the Have-Nots

A Commentary

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By Nicholas von Hoffman

When one of the POWs walked onto the red carpet the other day and did the patriotic obeisances that have been repeated until they have become near litany, he did say one thing we hadn't heard before. He thanked the pro-war portion of the American populace for their support, citing in particular the minutes of silence at the football games and the bumper stickers.

Maybe those moments of civic religion between halves did help. For all outward appearances, the POWs held in North Vietnam were treated about as well as felons in our penitentiaries back home. (The treatment accorded their captives by the Viet Cong in the South needs more learning about.) But confirmation that public opinion—if it's the right public in the right nation—may help comes from two young Frenchmen.

In the summer of 1970, Jean-Pierre Debris and Andre Menras committed an act of imbecilic courage by unfurling a Viet Cong flag in front of General Thieu's National Assembly building in Saigon. They were slammed into the Chi Hoa prison/concentration camp where they languished until three months ago.

Menras says, "If we are still alive, it is thanks to thousands of people who sent us letters, who were concerned about us. From the moment thousands of French people decided to pressure the Saigon fascists, from that moment on, we saw a difference in the attitude of our jailers. They stopped beating us," and ultimately freed the two young men who'd come to Vietnam in the French equivalent of one of our Peace Corps operations.

That takes care of the occidentals. They go first class. In captivity or out, Americans and Frenchmen get treated better than the natives even when their jailers are natives. Most reports indicate both the North and the South Vietnamese treated each other's prisoners with a harshness which bordered on and sometimes reached barbarism.

Maybe we can dismiss it by saying that's what happens in a civil war, but there is still another class of prisoners in South Vietnam, the thousands and thousands who are referred to as "political." They're a mixture of Communists, Catholics, Buddhists and war-hating, home-loving neutralists, not to mention a miscellany of miserables such as old, anti-French colonial patriots, students and shoe shine boys who didn't have the requisite 50-cents to bribe the cops.

As it became clear that the combatants were moving toward some sort of cease-fire agreement, Menras reports, the Saigon authorities took steps to hide the political prisoners: "They divided each cell into tiny

groups, separating people who had known each other for years. During this separation and change of cells a lot of prisoners disappeared completely. They even mixed Catholic students with members of the NLF so they could be classified as Communists; and all the political prisoners were mixed with the ordinary ones. They took away the files of these prisoners so that no one will be able to prove that there were political prisoners, and not ordinary criminals."

According to both Frenchmen, the treatment dished out to these politicals meets the highest standards set by the Gestapo. While they themselves suffered beatings and semi-starvation, they spoke to prisoners who saw and endured all manner of torture, some straightforwardly brutal and some done with calculated preparation as when "needles were inserted under the fingernails (and) a sheet of tissue paper was attached to each needle after which the ventilator just opposite was turned on. The breeze from the ventilator set the tissue paper in motion and this, in turn, made the needles move under the nails." Women captives were routinely raped and otherwise sexually abused.

At the same time that we're learning about these horrors, Michael D. Bengé, an American civilian official captured in 1968, has been released from prison with stories about North Vietnamese cruelty toward himself and other captives. This will allow people to say if they do it, why shouldn't we? But that's the kind of question that answers itself merely by being asked.

Beyond that, our people, no matter how badly abused and tortured, are getting out. The people whom Debris and Menras met in prison aren't. They have no one to bargain for them unless it is the NLF who presumably will concentrate on getting their own people freed, and not the other thousands who're imprisoned although they were never members of the Viet Cong. Furthermore, of all the warring parties in this mess, the NLF have the weakest power position and the least leverage on the Thieu government.

So these wretches will have to cling to life as best they can. Lost in the concentration camps and tiger cages, their names are on no lists of repatriation, nor will they be memorialized on any bumper stickers. For them there will be no moments of half time silence, no candles lit, no prayer.

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