

Heroes and Victims

By Robert Jay Lifton

NEW HAVEN—All wars seem to require heroes around which civilian populations can cleanse themselves of guilt and reassert immortalizing principles. But this may be the first war in history in which returning prisoners of war have been selected for that role.

A long and degrading war has made Americans desperate for heroes, and these men, returning Rip Van Winkle-like to reunions with their families after as long as eight years of incarceration in an alien land, seem as qualified as any. Emotions understandably run high as they express gratitude to their Commander in Chief for arranging their return and a survivor's need to feel that their ordeal was significant and associated with national honor.

But creating heroes is not without risk—for the appointed ones and those who anoint them. In this case the carefully manipulated spectacle through which the Administration, the military, and the media (especially television) are synthesizing a hero myth falsifies not only the relationship of the returning prisoners to the war but, above all, the war itself. All but swept away is the role we assigned these men: saturation bombings of civilian areas with minimal military targets, their "truck counts" from the air, so necessary for career advancement, inseparable in accuracy and morality from the "body counts" of infantrymen on the ground. Swept away too are the human complexities of what went on in the prison camps—mixtures of courage, frailty, cooperation and bitter antagonism having to do with the same divisions about the war that nearly tore American society apart at home.

Now these men must return to families and communities still confused and scarred by a war devoid of American glory. The heroic aura placed around them can obscure but not eliminate either the conflicts shared by all Vietnam veterans in connection with the taint of their war or the added conflicts of incarceration. A good deal of experience with Vietnam veterans has demonstrated that

psychological health and personal growth depend upon a man's capacity to come to terms with those conflicts by achieving a measure of insight concerning his experience.

But any such efforts at self-understanding on the part of the prisoners can only be distorted and interfered with by the hero's mantle being bestowed on them. The result could be various forms of psychological let-down involving painful gaps between public images of pure virtue and private questions about meaning and integrity. We would better serve returning prisoners, and other Vietnam veterans as well, with attitudes of openness, truthfulness and recognition of the extent to which all Americans fighting in this war have been victimized no less than their assigned enemies.

The same is true for society at large. Here the painful question is whether we are capable of extracting from this war its one potential benefit: political and ethical illumination arising from hard appraisals of what we did and why we did it. Such illumination could, as it already has for some, open our eyes to the nature of the deadly romance of war and the part played by manipulated patriotic emotions in that romance.

Administration officials and returning prisoners not only reassert the official mythology of peace with honor, but also attack war opponents and proposals of amnesty, lest there be any suggestion that resisters and protesters were right and official America wrong. And the sensibilities of returning prisoners become an excuse for suppressing unpleasant information about America's involvement in the war: the C.B.S. cancellation of a Vietnam veteran's antiwar play "Sticks and Bones," and the virtual media blackout of important eyewitness accounts of South Vietnamese prisons by two French teachers that tell of other P.O.W.'s emerging less erectly from tiger cages, their legs often broken as part of sustained torture.

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