

The Case of the Accused POWs

STRICTLY SPEAKING, it is not possible to condone any hint of collaboration with the enemy by American prisoners of war. Some cases were reprehensible indeed from all reports. Others were the outgrowth of torture and general mistreatment. To take the totally hard view of POW infractions does not consider reality nor the frailty of the human condition. One can hope for superhuman courage on the part of the tortured POW without really expecting it.

Collaboration of another sort, of course, is a different matter. We refer to those American peace activists who carried their anti-war agitations far from the domestic arena to the enemy capital at Hanoi. That is the kind of collaboration that can find no justification whatever if patriotism and loyalty to one's own country retain any meaning at all.

IT IS widely understood that the Defense Department had proposed to follow a policy of neither seeing nor speaking evil about those POWs who may have been guilty of military misconduct in North Vietnamese prison camps.

The rationale was that rather than raise a divisive new issue of endless potential, it would be better to let the matter quietly rest.

That implied policy seemed wise to us and we venture to speculate that it bears strong public endorsement too. But Air Force Colonel Theodore W. Guy has thrown a wrench into it. He charged eight enlisted POWs with collaboration with the enemy and general conduct offensive to the military code.

Those, presumably including top people in the Pentagon, who had predicted untoward results if official charges were filed now see their fears confirmed. One of the former prisoners has denied the charges and is preparing to sue Colonel Guy for a million dollars. Others of the named prisoners well may come forward with counter-accusations of their own. Fingers will be pointed in all directions.

Brave and honorable men can stand just so much in the kind of cruel environment our men endured in North Vietnamese prison camps. Obviously not all lived fully up to the exacting standards of military conduct.

BUT IT would be impossible to sort out and measure the precise extent to which this man or that finally yielded to enemy blandishments and torture. To even try would be counter-productive and probably result in a mass smear.

Courts martial in this particular circumstance would serve no purpose of example or discipline. Better not to open that can of worms. Any who may have been guilty of gross collaboration with the enemy soon will find their way out of the military of their own volition and without benefit of court martial. The others will remain and advance their careers.

Meanwhile the official standing of Colonel Guy as a complainant has not been clarified. Certainly the Defense Department does not have to prosecute his charges in contravention of presumed earlier policy.

If the colonel has knowledge of what he takes to be betrayal, his anger is understandable. Yet in the larger view, it is best to write a quiet and non-controversial curtain to the POW drama.