

"If the people believe there's an imaginary river out there, you don't tell them there's no river there. You build an imaginary bridge over the imaginary river." —advice to Richard Nixon from Nikita Khrushchev

## BOOK ONE: CAPTIVITY

### CHAPTER ONE: "Small and Suspicious Circles"

January, February, March, 1973

Once upon a time we had a Civil War. Over six hundred thousand Americans slaughtered one another. Soon afterward, the two sides began carrying out sentimental rituals of reconciliation: Confederate soldiers, for instance, parading through the streets of Boston to the cheers of welcoming Yankee throngs, John Quincy Adams II orating from the podium, "You are come so that once more we may pledge ourselves to a new union, not a union merely of law, or simply of the lips: not of a union...of the sword, but gentleman, the only true union, the union of hearts." Dissenters from the new post-bellum comity—like the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who argued that the new systems of agricultural labor taking root in the South and enforced by Ku Klux Klan terror hardly differed from slavery—were shouted down. "Does he really imagine," the *New York Times* indignantly asked, "that outside of small and suspicious circles any real interest attaches to the old forms of the Southern question?"

Meanwhile Americans were disuniting themselves in fresh new ways. The nation expanded westward—violently. A radical new kind of industrialism shuddered across the nation, wrenching yeoman farmers from the land, forcing formerly independent artisans into degraded factory work, giving rise to Robber Baron fortunes, financial panics, and wretched immigrant slums. 1877, the year Reconstruction ended, was a year of cataclysmic labor strikes, one of the most violent in American history.

But it was also the era that founded patriotic societies like the Daughters of the American Revolution, introduced a sentimental cult of flag worship, and invented something called "Americanism" as the new litmus test for citizenship. "The man who would foment strife between East or West, North or South, between labor and capital, or any section of our life is the universal enemy," a typical opinion leader proclaimed: transcending strife was declared the meaning of our nation. That was who we are.

America, the innocent: always searching for totems of a unity it can never quite achieve. Even, or even especially, when its crises of disunity are most pressing—it is one of the structuring stories of our nation. The "return to normalcy" enjoined by Silent Cal after the Great War; the union of hearts

declaimed by J.Q Adams Jr. on Boston's Bunker Hill parade ground after the War Between the States. And in 1973, after some ten years of war in Vietnam, America tried to do it again.

On January 24, 1973, five days into the second term he had won with the most commanding landslide in U.S. history, President Richard Nixon went on TV to announce the conclusion of the peace talks in Paris, that the Vietnam War was over. There were no parades, and Mike Royko, the *Chicago Sun Times's* regular-guy columnist, was grateful for it:

"It wasn't like 1945, when the end of the war brought a million people downtown to cheer. Now the president comes on TV, reads his speech, and without a sound the country sets the clock and goes to bed.... There is nothing to cheer about this time. Except that it is over... Mr. Nixon's efforts to inject glory into our involvement were hollow. All he had to say was that it is finally over.

"'Peace with honor.' He had to use the wilted phrase... It is hard to see the honor....

"Why kid ourselves? They didn't die for anyone's freedom. They died because we made a mistake. And we can't justify it with slogans and phrases from other times.

"It was a war that made the sixties the most terrible deco in our history.... If we insist on looking for something of value in this war then maybe it is this:

"Maybe we finally have the painful knowledge that we can never again believe everything our leaders tell us....

"And maybe the people in power will have learned that the people of this country are no longer willing to go marching off without having their questions answered first."

Twenty days later, at the airport in Hanoi, the first wave of prisoners incarcerated by our Communist enemies began to come home. What the Pentagon labeled "Operation Homecoming" suddenly turned the network news into a nightly patriotic spectacle. Battered camouflage buses conveyed the first sixty men to the planes that would bear them to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for their convalescence; a Navy captain named Galand Kramer unfurled a homemade sign out the window, scrawled on a scrap of cloth: "GOD BLESS AMERICA & NIXON." The buses emptied; officers shouted out commands in loud American voices to free American men. They marched in smart formation, slowing to accommodate comrades on crutches. Onboard, and on TV, they kissed nurses, smoked too many American cigarettes, circulated newsmagazines with their wives and children on the cover, and drank a pasty white nutrient shake whose taste they didn't mind, a newsmen explained, because it was the first cold drink some of them had had in eight years. On one of the three planes they passed a wriggling puppy from lap to lap. "He was a Communist dog," explained the Navy commander who smuggled him to freedom in his flight bag, "but not any more!"

At Clark, the tarmac was thronging with kids in baseball and Boy Scout uniforms, women sitting on lawn chairs with babes in arms, airmen with movie cameras, all jostling one another for a better view of a red carpet that had been borrowed at the last minute from Manila's sumptuous Intercontinental Hotel because the one they used for the usual round of VIPs—generals, admirals, even presidents—wasn't sumptuous enough. Navy flier Jeremiah Denton was the first to descend. In a crisp brocaded dress uniform with captain stripes newly affixed, he stood erect at the microphone and pronounced in a slowly swelling voice:

"We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our country—" (a stately echo: "*country—country—country...*")

"We are profoundly grateful to our Commander in chief—

"And our nation for this day—

"God. Bless. America."

Robinson Risner, the first man off the second group of planes to arrive, became a prisoner in

August of 1965—five months after appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine as "the classic example of the kind of dedicated military professional who was leading the American effort in Vietnam." Eyes sparkling, thrusting his fist into the air, his enthusiasm overrode his military bearing: "It's almost too wonderful to express...I would like to thank you all. I would like to thank our president...thank you ever so much." The President called him long distance. Risner told him "it would be the greatest personal honor and pleasure to shake your hand and tell you personally how proud we are to have you as our President." Nixon said it was the most moving experience he had ever had in his life.

In the days to come, the cameras lingered on cafeteria trays: strawberry pie. Steak. Corn on the cob. Cornish game hens. Ice cream. Eggs. "Beautiful!" sighed a man in a hospital gown on TV to a fry cook whipping up eggs. On Valentine's Day, in Hawaii for refueling on the way back home, the cameras luxuriated over the nurses who defied orders and broke through the security line to bestow flowered leis on their heroes. Then the cameras followed the men to the base exchange, where a boom mike overheard Captain Kramer gingerly trying on a pair of bell-bottomed pants: "I must say, they're a little different from what I would normally wear!"

The next stop was Travis Air Force Base in California, where for twelve long years the flag-draped coffins had come home. Now it was Ground Zero for Times Square 1945 images: wives leaping into husbands' arms, teenagers unabashedly knocking daddies off their feet, seven-year-olds bringing up the rear, sheepish, shuffling; they had never met their fathers before.

From there the men shipped out to service hospitals around the country, especially prepared for their return with color TVs and bright yellow bedspreads to mask the metallic hospital tone; once more words like "God—God—God" and "'duty—duty—duty" and "honor—honor—honor" and "country—country—country" echoed over airport tarmacs. The first men to touch ground stateside were those given expedited discharge to comfort terminally ill relatives. Press accounts credited at least one mother with a miraculous recovery. Miracles, according to the press, were thick on the ground.

*"The first thing she did when she raced to embrace her husband...was slip his wedding ring on his finger. The ring, she told reporters, had been sent to her, along with her husband's wallet..."*

*"By all rights he should have come out on a stretcher. But he refused and was determined he was going to come out walking."*

*"When Captain John Nasmyth Jr. landed after years of captivity, a dozen strangers rushed up to him and thrust into his hand metal bracelets bearing his name. The strangers had been wearing the bracelets for as long as two years or more, as amulets of their concern and their faith in his safe return."*

The bracelets first became a pop culture phenomena in 1970, introduced at a "Salute to the Armed Forces" rally in Los Angeles hosted Governor Ronald Reagan. By the summer of 1972, they were selling at the rate of some 10,000 per day. The bearer vowed never to remove it until the name stamped on the metal came home. Some wearers, the *New York Times* reported, believed them to "possess medicinal powers"—and not just the schoolyard mystics who displayed them two, ten, a dozen to an arm. A Wimbledon champ said one cured his tennis elbow. Lee Trevino insisted his bracelet saved his golf game.

And now that they were no longer needed, there was talk of melting them down for a national monument on the Mall.

When Captain Nasmyth arrived in his hometown, he was led to a billboard that read "HANOI FREE JOHN NASMYTH." He chopped it down with a ceremonial ax with his entire community gathered 'round. The photo ran in newspapers around the country. A black POW addressed a undergraduate classroom at a black university in Tennessee, the students examining him as if they had unearthed, one newspaper said, a "member of a nearly extinct sociological species: American Negro,

circa 1966." He told them "we have the greatest country in the world." That made front page news, too. One of the most quoted returning warriors was a colonel who noted all the signs reading "We Love You." "In a deeper sense," he said, "I think what people are saying is 'We Love America.'" Another implied the greatest Vietnam miracle of all: the POWs won the Vietnam war. "I want you to remember that we walked out of Hanoi as winners. We're not coming home with our tails between our legs. We returned with honor."

NBC broadcast from high school wood shop in a tiny burg in Iowa—John Wayne's hometown—where students were fashioning a giant key to the city for the parade they were throwing for a POW native son; then the anchorman threw it to his correspondent in the Philippines, who filled five full minutes of airtime calling the names, ranks, service branch, and hometowns of twenty more exuberant Americans as they bounded, limped, or occasionally, were borne upon stretchers, down the red carpet, and then to their next stop, the base cafeteria. ("Scrambled eggs!" "How many?" "How many can you handle?")

The screen filled with a red, white, and blue banner.

"The prisoners' coming back seems the one thing about Vietnam that has finally made all Americans finally, indisputably, *feel good*... Jack Perkins, NBC news."

Observed the *Washington Post*, "Whatever their views on other aspects of the war nearly every American considers the long-suffering prisoners of war to be authentic heroes."

Not every American. There were the regular-guy columnists, many of whom, in 1973, were liberal. Pete Hamill, in his Valentine's Day column in the liberal *New York Post*, pointed out that the vast majority of the prisoners were bomber pilots, and thus were "prisoners because they had committed unlawful acts"—bombing civilians in an undeclared war. He remembered "waiting for a guy up at Sing Sing one time, who had done hard time for armed robbery, and the emotions were almost the same." The *New York Times*, in one of its first dispatches from the Philippines, reported, "Few military people here felt the return of the prisoners marked the end of the fighting. 'They're sending out just as many as come back,' said a young Air Force corporal who works at the airport. 'They're all going to Thailand, they're just moving the boundaries of the war back.'"

Not even all POWs. When Edison Miller, the first Marine to be repatriated, arrived at Camp Pendleton every jarhead and civilian employee on base stood at attention to receive him. After the burst of applause stopped, he held up a clenched fist, then turned his back to the crowd. He received the silent treatment from his fellow prisoners on the Freedom Bird back home.

And not indisputably—the defensiveness of the President's rhetoric showed that. He spoke of the "way that our POWs could come off those planes with their heads high, knowing that they had not fought in vain," at a meeting of the executive council of the AFL-CIO in Florida on February 19. The next day, before a joint session of the South Carolina legislature, the first to pass a resolution in praise of Nixon's peace with honor, telling the "mother of a young man who gave his life in this war" that "James did not die in vain, that the men who went to Vietnam and have served there with honor did not serve in vain, and that our POWs, as they return, did not make the sacrifices they made in vain"; the way the returning men started echoing him: "I haven't changed my mind nor do I think I stayed there in vain. I think we came out of there with honor."

*With honor, not in vain*: a whole lot of people must have been worrying otherwise. Or else it wouldn't have been repeated so much.

"The nation begins to feel itself whole again," proclaimed *Newsweek*, which gave over eight pages to images of celebration, including a two-color-pages time-lapse of one couple's joyful embrace. *Time* speculated how "these impressive men who had become symbols of America's sacrifice in Indochina might help the country heal the lingering wounds of war."

Though some stubbornly refused to be healed. It would take more than a "Pentagon pin-up" picture," a *Newsweek* reader wrote, to make her forget "that these professional fighting men were trained in the calculated destruction of property and human life." A *Time* reader spoke up for his fellow "ex-grunts": "Why were we sneaked back into our society? So our country could more easily forget the crimes we committed in its name?"

Turn on the TV, open a newspaper or a dentist-office magazine, and a new journalistic genre was impossible to avoid: the feature affecting to explain to the Rip van Winkles all they had missed while incommunicado in prison camps, at a time when, as NBC's gruff senior commentator David Brinkley put it, "a decade now is about equal to what a century used to be, because change is so fast."

On February 22 the *Today* show devoted both its hours to the exercise.

"Generally, they've been years of crisis," the anchorman began. "Basically, there are two revolutions."

Only two?

A "DEMAND EQUALITY" sign: "They walked in picket lines, they badgered congressmen, they formed pressure groups"—who? He was speaking of women, only ordinary women. "They strived for 'lib'," said the attractive blonde newscaster, Barbara Walters—"as in liberation."

A mob of long-haired young men: "protest, demonstrations, disorders, riots, even death flared on"—where? On elite college campuses, where students "didn't trust anyone over thirty" "and contested "the whole fabric of Western Judeo-Christian morality."

Gene Shalit, *Today's* bushy-haired entertainment critic, reported how "federal legislation brought the vote to two million more blacks," and that "in 1964, when the first POWs were taken in Vietnam, most of us thought that was what was wanted. The phrase most often used was 'equal opportunity.'... Then came 1967 and a riot in Detroit.... There was Malcolm X, a failure in every way according to the 'white' code; he became a folk hero among blacks...each asking that he not be redesigned in the white image, but that America change to accommodate *them*."

Nineteen new nations, from Bangladesh to Botswana, a war in Israel won in six days—"but terrorism followed": cue picture of a man in a ski mask on a balcony in Munich.

*Bonnie and Clyde*, the hit movie from 1967, made the criminal life "look like fun and games," and changed Hollywood; *The Godfather*, from 1972, "the biggest-money-maker since 1965's *Sound of Music*," "at once glorified and sentimentalized the mafia." *Last Tango in Paris*, in theaters now, featured "clear depictions of the most elemental sexual acts, and perhaps some aberrations as well, but what it shows most is that here in New York at five dollars a ticket the film is a sellout, and that ordinary respectable folks like you are all going to see it."

Finally there came a familiar Hollywood image: a tall, handsome man in a Stetson. But the still was from *Midnight Cowboy*, and the camera pulled back to show the titular cowboy was hugging a shrunken and disheveled Jewish man, and Barbara Walters explained it signified the new Hollywood trend "toward dealing openly with homosexuality."

Assassinations: Malcolm X. Martin Luther King. Robert F. Kennedy. George C. Wallace.

Then fashion: "*Unisex*--remember that word..."

Some ninety minutes later, two chin-stroking *penseurs* were asked by the stern-voiced anchorman what was the most profound change the POWs faced. Answered the editor of *Intellectual Digest*: "For the first time Americans have had at least a partial loss in the fundamental belief in ourselves. We've always believed we were the new men, the new people, the new society. The 'last best hope on earth,' in Lincoln's terms. For the first time, we've really begun to doubt it."

This pretense that some six hundred POWs newly returned to their families would be wasting two hours learning about the latest slang from Gene Shalit felt a little bit fantastic. But the ritual was not for them. It was for us—as if these men might somehow be able to mystically deliver us across the bridge of years to the time before the storm. Americans suddenly could not get enough of hearing precisely how 1964 was a foreign country. It was their gift to us. "Having missed much of the destructiveness of these past few years," one letter writer to *Newsweek* exulted, they had "preserved a vision of the way America ought to be."

Explained Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News the same evening as that *Today* show special, "Some returning POWs and their wives after years of separation have decided to divorce." There followed, on screen, a lovely bride, a stout proud man in officer's dress, a wedding march pealing forth from the organ:

"Dorothy said her husband's return was like a resurrection, and that for her it was like a new life beginning. So she went out and bought an all new white wedding gown. And Dorothy and Johnny Ray reaffirmed the marriage vow they first made four and a half years ago."

(Cut to ten seconds on the long white train of her gown, then the cross above the altar; fifteen seconds of him slipping on the wedding ring.)

"It was a short, simple ceremony."

(Kiss, organ recessional.)

"Captain and Mrs. Johnny Ray will soon be home to their three children in Paul's Valley, Oklahoma. David Dick, CBS News at the post chapel, Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas."

That was one sort of homecoming story. Here was another: a Balboa Naval hospital where many POWs convalesced, a wife later told an oral historian, "it was like the Spanish Inquisition. Everyone asked how the wives had behaved. I could hear beatings in some rooms. A lot lot women had been swinging."

Some outlets told those other stories. The newspaper that had scolded naysayers who dared suggest the Civil War may not have ended America's racial ordeal was a very different institution a century later. Most institutions were very different. The small and suspicious circles had expanded exponentially.

On the front page of the *Times* on February 5 America met one Alice Cronin, dressed in faded hip-hugging bell-bottomed jeans and no shoes, smoking cigarettes, hair flopping loose, posing outside her San Diego home as movers unloaded the fashionable puffy white couch she bought "for the return of her husband, a Navy pilot held by Hanoi for six years." She was worried: "Mike married a very traditional wife...Now my ideas and values have changed...I can't sit home and cook and clean house. I'm very career oriented, and I just hope he goes along and agrees with that...he's missed out on a lot—liking a more casual lifestyle, being nonmaterialistic." She hoped he understood why she didn't trust a single thing the administration said about the war in Vietnam. She also hoped he would go along with something else: "Then there are shifting sexual mores, the whole thing about relationships not necessarily being wrong outside of marriage. I know myself really well sexually, and he's missed out on a good deal of that."

She was contrasted to Sybil Stockdale, the classic by-the-book officer's wife, who spoke from "her sunny kitchen," busy mending the rug left over when her husband who bore the appropriately macho name of James Bond Stockdale took off for his first bombing mission over the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964. For his return, she explained, "I want the living room to look the same."

There were two groups of POW wives, Alice Cronin explained. "I'm definitely in the second group." There were, by 1973, two groups of just about everything.

Two kinds of POW reports, for instance. CBS, whatever their approach to Watergate, the economy, school desegregation, or the recent reaffirmation of a jury of Lieut. William "Rusty" Calley's peers that 20 years in the stockade was "not too severe a punishment for his choosing to commit mass murder," played up the sentimental rituals of reconciliation. NBC, on the other hand, rounded out its coverage of the first week of Operation Homecoming with a feature from the hospital bed of a Marine private, sad-eyed, fidgety, nervous, who'd been paralyzed from the waste down by machine gun fire. It was different, he said, when he came home. "The administration, at that time, was fighting a pitched battle, um, with a lot of people. And when you're trying to—trying to justify the cost of the war, you don't want to exaggerate the costs of the war, you're going to play it down as much as you can. You're not going to show any body bags coming home, you're not going to show any, um, amputees coming home, you're not going to show any paraplegics."

Newspapers in small towns like Bend, Oregon, Reading, Pennsylvania, and Lewiston, Maine, ran with the Navy's press release of the poetry written in captivity by a Navy commander in tribute to the POW "women who wait at home" (*"Are not these women, of men gone to war/ The unsung heroes, today as before..."*). But in the *New York Times* columnists like Tom Wicker excoriated "the warped sense of priorities on the home front" that afforded so much more attention to "these relatively few POW's than the 50,000 dead boys who came home in body bags, some of them with smuggled heroin obscenely concealed in their mangled flesh," "for whom the only bracelet is a band of needle marks." He reported that coincident with the lionization of this certain class of veterans—downed airmen, professional soldiers to a man, spit-shined, proud, and patriotic—the administration had frozen treatment for drug-addicted veterans, opposed measures to provide education and job rehabilitation for vets who were unemployed at twice the rate of the general public, and, in its fiscal 1974 budget, proposed to arbitrarily limit the allowable population in veterans hospitals five percent, to 80,000. On February 23 the paper editorialized that in the "succession of hand salutes, stiffly prepared statements, medical bulletins, and canned handouts concerning the joys of steak and ice cream" of Operation Homecoming, the "hard-won lessons of Vietnam are in danger of being lost."

On the merits, sound editorial judgment. For that had been Richard Nixon's intention for the POW issue from the start.

When American pilots were first taken prisoner in North Vietnam U.S. policy had been pretty much to ignore them—part and parcel of President Lyndon B. Johnson's determination to keep the costs of his increasingly futile martial escalation from the public. The enemy, though, preferred to publicize them, which was why, in June of 1966, Hanoi announced to the world it would put these pilots carrying out an undeclared war on trial as "air pirates," and paraded them through the streets past jeering crowds for the cameras on the Fourth of July, down streets pock-marked by shattered schools and hospitals and lined on each side every dozen yards or so by concrete civilian bomb shelters. In 1967 the first American flier was tortured into appearing on film to say he was being treated humanely. Also in 1967, the first American peace activists visited North Vietnam, documenting widespread civilian carnage, and returning with a devastating argument: since the Pentagon claimed their laser-guided bombs were the most accurate in the history of warfare, if that was true, pilots had to know they were targeting civilian areas—and if that was false, then who knew what else the Pentagon was lying about?

A war of position emerged, peaceniks versus the Pentagon, with the POWs the political football. Communist officials began releasing small numbers of prisoners who had independently arrived at doubts about the war. The deal was that they had to be released directly to peace activists, and allowed to speak uncensored to the press. Wherever possible the military snatched the released men back before

they had the chance to speak to anyone at all—which the activists said proved their point: the Pentagon was more interested in propagandizing for war than freeing its victims. Then, a more formidable adversary emerged in Sybil Stockdale, the wife of Jim Stockdale, the highest ranking Navy POW. She attacked the Johnson administration from the right, organizing, against the Pentagon's wishes, a "League of Wives of American Prisoners of War" to shout from the rooftops for their release—but only according to strictest military protocol, which she argued had been cruelly traduced by cooperating with the enemy. From two directions at once, Johnson's attempt to play down the existence of hundreds of American prisoners had come a cropper. And by 1968, the Republican presidential nominee had spied in his dilemma a political opportunity. Richard Nixon would place these sympathetic prisoners and their martyred families at the *center* of the story of the Vietnam War. He would do so in order to control the public's perception of a war most of the people who voted for him had thought he had quickly promised to end. It was one of those Nixonian gambits so devious and diabolical that, reviewing it in retrospect, it is hard to believe it actually happened. It was also something that, to those small and suspicious circles of Americans predisposed to distrust Richard Nixon, had always smelled to high heaven. It was one of the reasons—a main one, in fact—those circles came to expand so exponentially by 1973.

One day in the first spring of Richard Nixon's presidency, the same week disillusionment over the not-yet-winding-down war turned up several notches after media reports of a futile battle at a place called "Hamburger Hill," and the same day the war at home turned violent at "People's Park" at the University of California at Berkeley, reporters at a routine Pentagon briefing perked up when none other than the Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird of Wisconsin, took the podium. They perked up some more when he confirmed the existence of some 500 to 1,300 American "POW/MIAs"—Prisoners of War/Missing in Action, 200 of them held longer than any prisoner in World War II. "The North Vietnamese claimed they were treated humanely"—indeed, that was the message that had been delivered in the POWs own voices on tapes the enemy released to the world. "I am distressed by the fact that there is clear evidence that this is not the case."

It was pretty much the American public's introduction to these men and their plight. Secretary Laird invoked the Geneva Convention's requirements that the names of prisoners be revealed, that the sick and wounded be sent home, that impartial inspections and free exchange of mail be allowed. "Most importantly, we seek the prompt release of all American prisoners," he said. Then he brought up the issue of family: "Hundreds of American wives, children, and parents continue to live in a tragic state of uncertainty caused by the lack of information concerning the fate of their loved ones."

The North Vietnamese officials' astonishment was like the British after the Great War who, witnessing the way America trampled all logic and good military order to get their troops home first, remarked, "How odd it is that only American boys have mothers." These Vietnamese men had lost children themselves, to American bombs. With so many schools, hospitals, and farmers' fields obliterated by B-52s, the notion of throwing *their* alleged violations of Geneva into the foreground of international opinion seemed rather extraordinary. They shot back that they would not so much as give out prisoners' names "as long as the United States does not cease its war of aggression and withdraw its troops from Vietnam."

That worked, for Richard Nixon's purposes. The *Washington Post* editorialized, "It is hard to see how so retrograde a response advances the interests of any government that seeks to present itself to the world as fair and humane."

Meanwhile the Pentagon and State Department mobilized public relations. At officer clubs around the country, they co-opted Sybil Stockdale's embryonic League of Wives of American Prisoners of War, sometimes inventing chapters outright. When Hanoi announced on July 4—a favorite day for

Communist propaganda aimed at international public opinion—that they would be releasing more prisoners to antiwar activists, the Pentagon reversed its ban on POW wives speaking to the press. Images of families without fathers began showing up in the weekly picture magazines. The Pentagon responded to the announcement of the ultimate release of the three more POWs to peace activists by referring to the "over 1,300 *other* servicemen still missing or captured." The number was strategic. It reflected a Pentagon reclassification of fliers whose bodies were unidentified after crashes, not according to the former designation "Body Unrecovered," but "Missing in Action"—martyrs of an enemy of such devious, Oriental cruelty, as the *Armed Forces Journal* put it, they denied little boys and girls "a right to know if their fathers were dead or alive."

For the Labor Day holiday in 1969 the Pentagon put two freed prisoners behind a press conference podium. With the Secretary of Defense standing beside him, Lieutenant Robert Frishman described, in accurate generalizations, the treatment many of the POWs had been receiving since 1965: solitary confinement in dark stone rooms, frequent beatings, bodies bound in cruel contortions for hours with straps and ropes. He also invented a few cinematic embellishments. A Negro Air Force flier named Fred Cherry, he claimed, had been hung from the ceiling by his broken arm. A Navy man named Richard Stratton (who had appeared in a *Life* magazine photograph bowing before his captors) had had his nails pried from his fingers.

In the fullness of time, upon these men's repatriation, these claims would turn out to be invented: when freed, Dick Stratton still had fingernails; Fred Cherry's arm was intact. In a letter to POW families, the Pentagon reassured them why the public press conference may have differed from the private briefings they had received: "The briefing was specifically designed to bring the pressure of world opinion to bear on the enemy. We are certain you will not become unduly concerned over the briefing if you keep in mind the purpose for which it was tailored." Now, however, at this podium, for this purpose, Lieut. Frishman said, "I feel it is time people are aware of the facts."

The timing was strategic. A peace group called the Fellowship of Reconciliation had just returned home with a report from the island of Con Son where our South Vietnamese allies kept their tens of thousands of prisoners of war in a camp designed and built by us. The investigators took testimony hollered up at them by desolate voices from the abyss: "*I am a Buddhist monk and I spoke for peace in 1966. I am here for no reason except wanting peace.*" Such men and women were confined in what were known as "tiger cages," tiny, crippling bamboo cells in concrete pits, manacled to the floor, showered at intervals with torrents of lime for the purposes of hygiene, because they were served their daily allotment of rice by having it thrown down at them, and lived in their own waste.

This was the way the Vietnam War had deformed America: by making disinformation systematic. The President had pledged at his nominating convention that his first foreign policy objective would be "to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam." Now in the first summer of his presidency his negotiators in Paris stipulated that no further progress could be made on ending the war until all prisoner questions were resolved—a demand unheard of in any previous war, where the disposition of POWs was a mere parentheses to the cessation of hostilities. It also stood in direct contradiction to White House's public line that the Geneva Convention demanded the status of the POWs be negotiated on a separate, "humanitarian" track, having nothing to do with the settlement of the war. It was around the time the President was pursuing his "madman" theory: threatening via diplomatic backchannels the annihilation of North Vietnamese population centers and civilian infrastructure, possibly with nuclear weapons, unless all America's terms were met: "I can't believe that a fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn't have a breaking point!" his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger bellowed of what was known to his top-secret working group as "Operation Duckhook." Duckhook was abandoned as politically impossible after October 15, 1969, when some two million ordinary Americans took the

day off from school and work to march for immediate withdrawal—a possibility the middle-of-the-rovers at *Time* magazine now entertained on their cover. Aides prevailed upon the President that green-lighting Operation Duckhook might spark riots that would render the nation ungovernable. So the president escalated with other weapon at his disposal instead. The anti-war activists taking to the streets, he declared in a famous televised address, did not want us to rescue the South Vietnamese from Communist totalitarianism; they wanted to *lose*. He asked for the support of "you, the Great—Silent—Majority of my fellow Americans" instead—"the backbone of America," "the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators." Trust him, give him time: he would end the war, in his own time, with honor.

Privately he had always wanted to end the war slowly, and with no small measure of deceit. In 1966 he had told a confidante that military victory in Vietnam was impossible, and that the trick to properly ending it would be "pulling the cork from the bottle" with sufficient deliberateness to keep in power a South Vietnamese government friendly to the United States, at least temporarily, after America troops left. That slow, steady thinning of American troops—"Vietnamization"—was to be accompanied by strategic bombing to protect their retreat. But for that he required the public's patience and trust—and also their indifference to the cruelty of bombing. His speech November 3 was extraordinarily successful in earning that—not least because it was accompanied by a three-dimensional public-relations campaign with the POWs at its center. Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot spent a million dollars on newspaper ads imploring the nation to support the president. Congress unanimously declared November 9 a "National Day of Prayer for U.S. Prisoners of War in Vietnam," decrying the "ruthlessness and cruelty" of an enemy that would deploy families sentenced to "life in a cruel state of suspended animation,"

A dialectic unfolded. Whenever the war escalated, whenever the public showed signs of turning away *en masse* in disgust, the martyrs in the Hanoi Hilton were symbolically marched to the foreground, their suffering families walking point. Holidays usually coincided. Christmastime, precisely one month after investigative reporter Seymour Hersh revealed the My Lai massacre, POW wives were invited to the White House for an Oval Office, pageant standing mute beside the President as he lied that "this government will do everything that it possibly can to separate out the prison issue and have it handled as it should be, as a separate issue on a humanitarian basis." On Christmas Eve, three giant airliners leased by H. Ross Perot lifted off, one, "The Spirit of Christmas," bearing 58 POW wives and 94 of their children to demand a meeting with Communist negotiators, the others, christened "Peace on Earth" and "Goodwill Toward Men," to deliver thirty tons of Christmas dinners, holiday gifts, clothing, and medical supplies directly to the prisoners in Hanoi. In Paris the wives were lectured on truths stern-faced North Vietnamese diplomats considered self-evident: that the U.S. had caused and was continuing this war, had been the party drafting innocent civilians into it, that a sovereign Vietnam had been turning back such colonialist Goliaths since the Mongols and would not stop until it turned back this one too, and that the way to free their husbands was to prevail upon their government to stop the futile and sadistic terror bombing of their country that knew no sanction in international law. (A wife asked: "What should I tell my son, age 9, when he asks where is my father and when is he coming home?" An apparatchik responded: "Tell him his father is a murderer of North Vietnamese children and that he is being punished." The wives emerged too emotionally shattered to speak to the press.)

Perot and a full complement of reporters landed in Vientiane, Laos. There, they learned Hanoi was denying the planes permission to land. Then Hanoi said they might be allowed in via Moscow—if the cargo was repackaged into packets of three kilograms each and addressed to individual POWs. The planes' next stop on their 35,000 mile odyssey was Anchorage, where an assembly line of Girl Scouts and Rotarians worked overnight for ten straight hours. "Peace on Earth" next flew over the North Pole

to Copenhagen, and was denied permission to land in Moscow. "I learned I can't bring relief to these men," Perot announced to the nation on New Year's Eve, "but the American people without question can bring relief to these men if this becomes a matter of intense national concern."

The White House redoubled propaganda to make it so. Spring, 1970 bloomed in the shadow of the expansion of the ground war into Cambodia, and the martyrdom of four college students at Kent State; 700 POW/MIA relatives were flown to Washington at taxpayer expense for a rally hosted by the Daughters of the American Revolution and funded by defense contractors. Rechristened the "League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia," non-political and thus tax exempt (its fundraising list and instructions provided by the Republican National Committee, its membership rolls fleshed out by the Pentagon office otherwise devoted to informing family members of casualties in Vietnam), the wives lined up to testify at a special Congressional hearing on the North Vietnamese campaign to use prisoners of war as "pawns" to "wage psychological warfare against the United States." (Ross Perot testified proudly of the North Vietnamese's incredulity at all this concern over "just 1,400 men," and boasted that, when they told him of hospital wards shattered by American bombs, he promised to pay to rebuild them himself.) Across the country, the first POW bracelets were struck in time for an annual "Salute to the Military" ball in Los Angeles. (Governor Ronald Wilson Reagan presided, having just shut down all the state university campuses to prevent riots in the wake of the killings at Kent State; Hollywood choreographer Leroy Prinz, who had worked with Reagan on the 1942 film *Hollywood Canteen*, set the grand cavalcade of admirals and generals to trumpet fanfare music).

Matchbooks, lapel pins, billboards, T-shirts, bumper stickers ("POWs NEVER HAVE A NICE DAY!"). Fighter jets making thunderous football stadium fly-by's in tribute. Astronauts' melodramatic speeches to joint legislative sessions. Full page ads, blossoming in every newspaper, urging Hanoi to have a heart and release the prisoners for the sake of the children. "They just dig holes in the ground and drop them in," one wife explained to a magazine of the Hanoi Hilton. "They throw food down to them, and let them live there in their waste." She was confused, like many Americans were confused. American prisoners did not live like that. But that was exactly what was shown in a stunning photo essay from the American-built prison camp at Con Son Island in South Vietnam in a July, 1970 issue of *Life*.

A wise professor later described it all as "a lunatic semiology" where "sign and referent have scarcely any proportionate relation at all." And so the small and suspicious circles expanded, deep into the heart of the Establishment. They pointed out the disinformation constantly, in every possible forum.

Early in the third year of his presidency, after claiming "there are 1,600 Americans in North Vietnamese jails" (the Pentagon listed 460), the President announced, "As long as the North Vietnamese have any Americans, there will be Americans in South Vietnam and enough Americans to give them incentive to release the prisoners." The novelist Grace Paley responded in the *New York Times*: "Politicians and newsmen often talk as though these pilots had been kidnapped from a farm in Iowa or out of a canoe paddling the waterways of Minnesota. In reality, they were fliers shot down out of the North Vietnamese sky where they had no business to be; out of that blueness they were dumping death." ("Oh, Mrs. Paley," one wife replied. "My husband wouldn't do that!") Tom Wicker of the *Times* said that, considering the axiom that prisoners of war were prisoners as long as there was war, and that the enemy defined the state of war by the existence of American forces, the President's formulation logically suggested "we may keep both troops and prisoners there forever." More and more perfectly respectable Americans, inclined not to trust anything their president said, began wondering whether that wasn't something like the point.

Others were inclined to trust the President too well—which caused problems too. "The American

POWs have suffered the most barbaric handling of any persons of any nation in history," he told a gathering of newspaper editors; that being so, many agreed with the POW wife who wrote the president, "I demand a *complete troop withdrawal NOW!*" High school kids became fervent anti-war activists, out of their deep emotional attachment to bringing home the men whose names they wore on their POWs bracelets. Anti-war wives broke off from the League of Families, so carefully built up as a vehicle for White House propaganda, after the board squelched attempts to put the membership to a vote on whether or not to pressure the president to set a date for withdrawal. The rump group they organized announced the President had turned their husbands into "political hostages." This was the summer the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* published the Pentagon Papers, which revealed in the government's own hand that most of what the American people had been told about Vietnam for 25 years had been out and out lies. They pulled down the billboards they erected at Ross Perot's direction with demands aimed at Hanoi, and replaced them with ones directed at their president. POW wives and sisters appeared on platforms with Jane Fonda and John Kerry. One of them seconded the presidential nomination of George McGovern. She recalled the President's promise in 1968 to end the war. "The baby I was nursing when I heard those promises is four years old now. He's still never seen his father, and the war is still going on." George McGovern promised to remove all American forces from Vietnam within sixty days of his inauguration.

Richard Nixon said this would be surrender, and that Americans did not surrender. He won his reelection mandate, 61 percent and 49 states. He triumphantly announced the settlement at Paris. His critics pointed out that the terms he had arrived at were the same ones on the table when Lyndon Johnson began peace negotiations in 1968—only now they were purchased at the expense of 15,183 more American dead and four million more tons of American ordnance to pave over North and South Vietnam. The story the administration was telling about prisoners of war instrumental to how they occluded the fact. "The returning POWs," the new Secretary of Defense Elliot Richardson summarized the strategy to the President, "have dramatically launched what DOD is trying to do to restore the military to its proper position." The President agreed, well pleased: "We now have an invaluable opportunity to revise the history of this war."

God bless America. Let the healing begin. It lasted for perhaps a week.

Four hundred photographers, cameramen, and supporting technicians encamped at Clark in the Philippines to cover the return. It arrived that their contact with the heroes would be third-hand and censored—to preserve the men's health, the Pentagon insisted. It was one of the reason the media had to run so many images of POWs devouring ice cream and steak. The president of the American Psychological Association wrote to the Pentagon to ask "what precautions are being taken that the psychological briefing or treatment given to each returnee be aimed only at his own rehabilitation, and that no attempt will be made to manipulate the political opinions of the returnees." The *Los Angeles Times* printed the opinions of a sociology professor: "The last thing the Pentagon wants 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." The *New York Times* fired off a telegram to the Secretary of Defense: since "they were healthy enough to eat anything, horse around in the hospital, go shopping, see movies, and talk to virtually everyone else who runs into them," why couldn't they speak with reporters? The answer changed: to protect their privacy. The *New York Times* responded on its news pages: "They did not say, however, why the prisoners would be placed under orders forbidding public statements if they wanted to make them." Civilian POWs, the *Times* reported, would be given medical treatment only if they agreed not to talk to the press.

The rituals unfolded: the Freedom Bird touching down, the red-carpet unfurling, the single proud,

erect spokesman descending to boom his bromides over the tarmac—often reserving special praise for Richard Nixon by name, sometimes in language suspiciously close to administration catchphrases. On February 21 the *New York Times* reported that "the military's repatriation effort was carefully programmed and controlled" by a team of nearly 80 military public relations men, and printed these same flacks' brittle denials that the men at the microphones like stars at a movie premiere had been coached on what to say and how to say it. The *Times* quoted an old salt who said he recalled nothing like this when he covered the Korean War repatriation. But "that war had heroes and a somewhat sympathetic press. The Vietnam war has had neither until now."

The *Washington Post's* ombudsman, Robert C. Maynard, echoed the argument the next morning in an essay headlined "Return of the Prisoners: Script By Military." "Not surprisingly," he concluded, "we received a number of paeans to 'honorable peace' and could only wonder how that phrase happened to be among the first to pop out of the mouths of men in captivity for such long periods of time."

He also said, "They return to a society more surely programmed in 'them-against-us' terms than the one they left." That was confirmed ten days later, on March 3, when the entire letters page was given over to readers' responses. "Our returning prisoners seem to think President Nixon played some role in securing their release," a Henry T. Simmons of Washington wrote. "They claim to feel gratitude toward him for sticking out the war and making their own sacrifice meaningful, and they purport to express this view spontaneously. This has got to be intolerable to the *Washington Post*."

He was answered, contrapuntally, by Marion S. Eberly of Silver Spring: "While watching TV the first prisoner return, I was overwhelmed by the staging of those speeches about 'the President' and 'our Commander in Chief' and at one point heard the welcoming officer say in a low voice, 'Well done!' as though he had been fearful that that man might not go through with it. It is so easy to cease a false appearance."

E. R. Quesada, a retired Air Force officer: "It was anticipated that the media would soon attempt to ridicule the character and devotion displayed by our returning prisoners. The media... must be embarrassed and galled... Most Americans were thrilled... You can be sure that I am not following a military script when I say, as I now do, 'God bless America!'"

A housewife from Staunton, Virginia, signing her letter as her husband's wife: "Mrs. Frank J. McDonough." She agreed with Alan Hooker from Alexandria: "Imagine Maynard's reaction... if the men had returned bitter at their country and praising Hanoi the way he wanted them to. No mention would have been made of Hanoi propaganda, or the one-sided views of America presented in newspapers like yours that they were undoubtedly permitted to read. We would have heard nothing but praise for their 'courage' and 'forthrightness' in presenting 'the truth.' As a matter of fact, if even one POW does attack America, I'm sure it will be all over your front page."

The other side disagreed. "You really told it like it is," Dorothy Woodell of Sacramento wrote, noting she had made Xerox copies of the article to send "to everyone I know." She was certain, though, "there is more to be said on the issue," but "I'm sure that if you had said it, it never would have been printed anyhow."

The POW story took on a brittle feel. One *New York Times* dispatch from the Philippines recorded, "When one man deplaned here, his wife rushed toward him—but he warned her off with a stern whisper: 'I have to salute the flag, don't bother me.'" A February 23 front page story by Seymour Hersh reported that "camp life included occasional fist fights, a few near-suicides, and many cliques... One pilot reportedly pulled a knife on another prisoner during an argument." It ran the day of returnees' first stateside press conferences. They said that with most of their comrades still in the hands of the enemy, they weren't allowed to comment on what happened in captivity. Aggressive network correspondents pushed and pushed, as if to break them. Rattled, Captain James Mulligan (who had recently learned his

own wife had been an anti-war leader) grabbed a microphone to deliver a jittery non-sequitor: "I feel very strongly that it's about time the American people started pulling together. It's about time we all realize where we're going! It's about time we start raising the flag instead of burning it. I know people have strong feelings!... But we are all Americans. And it's about time we all get back to, to—the main thing."

The questions they were asked by reporters grew sharper: "Are you 100 percent satisfied with the way the Nixon Administration handled the war?" Their answers became more defensive: Lieutenant Commander Paul Galanti responded that he was "fantastically impressed with the courage that President Nixon displayed in an election year." "What do you think of the divisiveness?" another airman was asked, who responded, "We could not understand over there, where we, just Americans like everybody else, once a week we would get up and say the Pledge of allegiance; we could not understand how people could be so unpatriotic as to *condemn the Government in time of war* and like Captain Mulligan said, and I think it's a beautiful phrase—I think it's time we start *raising flags instead of burning them.*" (The president underlined those words in his briefing.)

The *New York Times* reported that the California-based organization known as VIVA ("Voices in Vital America," originally formed as the "Victory in Vietnam Association" to harass campus antiwar activists) had earned \$3,693,661 in 1972, "almost entirely" from sales of POW bracelets. It manufactured them for 50 cents and sold to the public at \$2.50, and their spokesman delighted that business was still brisk—"in fact we think the sales of the bracelets with the names of those still missing may pick up now." On the last day of February, they featured a captured B-52 pilot who conceded he had assailed the war and that he would have done it again. NBC rang out the month, after noting, "Along Highway 13 it is difficult to tell there is a cease-fire in Vietnam," by reminding viewers that North Vietnam always offered to release of American prisoners in exchange for prisoners held by South Vietnam, a condition the U.S. always refused. Anchorman John Chancellor looked stricken, as if astonished at the lunatic semiology of what he was about to say: "Nevertheless, the South Vietnamese are holding about 100,000."

That led a report via satellite from the island of Con Son. A man with a gnarled leg and swollen, distended knee gingerly lifted himself from bed with a trapeze: "This young man was working in his rice fields when he was cut down by government bullets that left him paralyzed from the waste down. The police kept him chained to a hospital bed for two years. He says his political beliefs were not important before he went to jail. The treatment he received here changed that. Now he teaches Viet Cong ballads to other patients."

The reporter, who had long hair, interviewed two American hospital workers who said that if patients didn't give the right answers to interrogators they "reach under the ribs and cracked the rib":

"Jane, you told me you met one old woman picked up by the police apparently paralyzed as the result of beatings and interrogations." The old lady was shown, her eyes swollen shut, hand-fed like a baby. *Time* quoted South Vietnamese government sources claiming people like her were imposters, hired to discredit President Thieu. They quoted another government source doubting Con Son survivors really existed: "How can they be alive? No one ever comes back from the tiger cages alive."

On March 1, a shouting match broke out on the floor of the New York State Assembly in Albany. One assemblyman offered a resolution honoring "Vietnam Veterans Week," "in support of liberty and freedom of all men," and in "rededication to the precepts that have made America such a tower of strength among the nations of the world."

"This is a lot of *bunk!*" Assemblyman Franz S. Leichter, Democrat of Manhattan, objected. "We were fighting for Thieu and bamboo cages for his political opponents!"

A Republican from white working-class Brooklyn: "Your opposing this resolution is a disgrace as

far as I'm concerned!"

A conservative colleague: "I have stood this nonsense long enough. For three years I've listened to him and his peace movement. I ask you all in the spirit of America and the spirit of the American flag to vote in favor, and God bless America."

A liberal: "There's a lot of difference between blessing America and blessing Richard Milhous Nixon," he said. And that it was "a credit to a nonwhite race who'd been invaded and pillaged that they did treat the prisoners the way they did."

On Friday, March 2 newspapers ran a UPI interview with a Minnesota POW who reported his darkest day in captivity when he heard of the reelection of the President. That Saturday the Nixon Administration worked furiously on political damage control after its announcement that North Vietnam would enjoy reconstruction aid as part of the postwar settlement. There was nothing unusual in the idea; the fact that America's defeated enemies always enjoyed rejuvenating aid had been the subject of a classic Cold War comic film, *The Mouse That Roared*, about a fictional little Middle European principality that declares war on the U.S. just so it could lose in order to rake in the reconstruction money. This time, however, the proposal brought down a rain of political vituperation, shocking the President. After all, hadn't he said these Communists were merciless torturers?

On Sunday the next batch of 106 POWs left Hanoi. Their cult was growing more insistent, more pious—and more defensive. "We wanted to come home, but we wanted to come home with honor," a colonel boomed from the tarmac microphone at Clark. "President Nixon has brought us home with honor. God bless those Americans who supported our President during our long ordeal." "Our motto was unity before self," proclaimed another. "Our objective was to return with honor. We have accomplished that task."

They grew more insistently traditionalist, too. On Monday the *Post* featured profiled Captain Harry Tarleton Jenkins Jr. (headline: "Free Navy POW Sure U.S. Right in Asia") who said he was "glad to put my wife back in skirts. I think a woman should be a woman and not whatever they're trying to be with all these movements."

The skeptics were growing more insistent, too. "These people had their feet on the ground while in prison," a Pentagon source had told the *Times'* Seymour Hersh in a Tuesday *New York Times* article, "POWs Planned Business Venture." "They heard enough and knew enough," he said, 'to realize that there would be demands for books, speeches, and endorsements... There's really nothing sinful in taking advantage of what's left,' the officer said. 'That's the way to play the game.'" "The POWs: Focus of Division," the *Times* reported the next morning.

That afternoon the CBS network made an announcement about a featured program scheduled for prime time two nights later, a Friday. The show was an adapted version of an off-Broadway drama that would soon win the Tony award for best play. *Sticks and Bones*, by Vietnam veteran David Rabe, opened on a bucolic suburban sit-com family. A master sergeant shows up at the door to return their son, blinded in Vietnam. He can't stay for coffee and fudge: "I've got trucks out there backed up for blocks. Other boys... And when I get back they'll be laying' all over the grass; laying' there all over the grass, their backs been broken, their brains jellied, their insides turned into garbage. No-legged boys and one-legged boys. I'm due in Harlem; I got to get to the Bronx and Queens, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Reading. I don't have time for coffee. I've got deliveries all over this country...."

The mother, named Harriet in the play—"Ginger" for TV—shows maternal instinct only in her horror at her son's sin "against the Sixth Commandment" with a Vietnamese prostitute. ("You know what the Bible says about these people... What does it mean that he's my son. How the hell is it that...*he*... is my son?") Dad—"Ozzie" in the original—smokes a gentle pipe, spouts pep talks ("I think

we're over the hump now... The air has been cleared, the wound acknowledged, and the healing has begun") and in-between reminisces of his glory days running high school track, schemes to frame his son for any crime that won't implicate the good name of the family. A priest counsels that "acceptance of an alien race is in fact the rejection of one's own race—it is in fact the rejection of one's own self—it is sickness." He is bludgeoned by the blind veteran's cane. An apparitional "yellow whore" appears, the father chokes her to death. A teenage brother wanders in babbling about sock hops, strumming a guitar. The protagonist moans, "I'm home now, and I want to drink from the toilet. And you will join me. You will join me." Distorted closeups punctuated the script's grotesqueries.

*Newsweek's* critic, who wrote under the pen-name "Cyclops," and was under his own the editor of the *New York Times Book Review* and a fellow traveler of the New Left, rhapsodized over the playwright's accomplishment: "Like a wounded Dreiser or a young O'Neil, he blunders into deep terrors and thrashes there. Such is his strength that he pulls us in after him. We are back among primal things, evil ceremonies, the sacrifice of the blind seer, the scapegoat become garbage, the rites claustrophobic. The final image on the TV screen is so perfect and so perfectly appalling that your mind will want to throw up." The *Times's* own critic thought the production "not very good," singling out for criticism that final image, a "pat, sadomasochistic, Oedipal binge of destruction": in it, the family provides the son the razor blade with which he kills himself, then throws out the body in a black plastic bag with the trash. Though he said it went without saying that it had to be broadcast nonetheless.

Local CBS affiliates would not have it. "We did not feel it was appropriate for TV in Detroit, where our working class audience would be offended," said one station manager after his preview of the program. An executive in Mississippi despaired that the damage was already done: like the hit movies *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door*, the show's proverbial "X" rating would only increase audience share once New York forced it down Middle America's throats nonetheless, at some unspecified time in the future—though not on WTOK-Meridian: "They can't sanitize it enough to what suits me." Only two minutes of commercials were sold for the two hour block. "In light of recent developments," the statement from CBS's president read, "many of us both at the network and among the stations are now convinced that its presentation on the air at this time might be unnecessarily abrasive to the feelings of millions of Americans whose lives or attention are at the moment emotionally dominated by the returning POWs and other veterans who have suffered the ravages of war." One newspaper letter-writer smelled elite conspiracy: "Had the play been shown with no advance publicity, it might have gone unnoticed as just another revolting, sick piece of theatrical garbage." The producer, Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival responded that the playwright was "not an elitist—he's from Dubuque." Papp walked out of his contract with CBS to produce 11 more plays over the next three years (his previous offering, described as "critically acclaimed, but low-rated" by the *Washington Post*, had been more what they had in mind: *Much Ado About Nothing*). Newton Minnow, the former FCC chairman famous for pleading for more highbrow fare on the medium he labeled the "vast wasteland," agreed "it would have been bad taste and judgment to show it at a time when our POWs are coming home." Papp said CBS was obligated to put on the show no matter who objected; it was a First Amendment issue. The ACLU got involved. A Syracuse station manager begged to be allowed to carry the feed: "Dammit, it's real. Life isn't just a bowl of cherries." Instead, he had to show a Steve McQueen movie just like all the others.

"Only a society with a great deal more self-confidence than ours could stand the disruptiveness of high art on TV," wrote a liberal columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*. He didn't give credit to the fact that even scheduling such a broadcast in the first place revealed just how much America had changed.

On March 28, the last POW shot down over North Vietnam landed at Clark AFB. His last name, coincidentally, was "Agnew," like the jingoistic vice president; but this Agnew brazenly told the press

there was no honor in the peace settlement because we actually had lost: as soon as the last American troops left, Communist troops would simply overrun South Vietnam. That same day, CBS president William Paley offered final word on *Sticks and Bones*. "We will run the show when things have calmed down."

*When things calmed down:* that had been what Operation Homecoming was supposed to have done. Operation Homecoming turned out instead to be an X-ray exposing the fractures cleaving America plain down the middle. It seemed like now there were two kinds of just about everything. Two tribes of Americans, certainly. One comprised the suspicious circles, which had once been small, who demanded a searching and thorough reckoning with the basic assumptions undergirding the nation as a new, higher patriotism for the 1970s.

The sentiment seemed exceptionally, extraordinarily broad. One of the reasons everybody knew it was exceptionally broad was that institutions like the *New York Times* took it as their mandate to report it. They did a feature during Operation Homecoming, for instance, from a sleepy suburb in Northern California, where "people think and feel differently from what they once did. They ask questions, they reject assumptions, they doubt what they are told." The Vietnam War? "I can't see where it was worth anything." The flag? "Now I'd rather not say the pledge; it has such little meaning to me. The things that are in it just aren't true, you know—like for all the people, that kind of thing. It's just rather ironic." It all was a sign, according to a left-leaning POW singled out for an interview by John Chancellor of NBC, of a country maturing, "shedding its Linus blankets, starting to think for ourselves." According to the Yale psychology professor Robert Jay Lifton, whose op-ed the *Times* ran on the day the last POW came home, Operation Homecoming was a "carefully manipulated spectacle": a sordid, childish attempt to sanctify "a new spiritual elect, reborn, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of war," in order restore the cult of the warrior, salvage an outdated vision of American omnipotence, and re-inflate the discredited image of Americans as God's chosen people. America could stand tall—in the midst of a "virtual media blackout of important eyewitness accounts of South Vietnamese prisons" of "other P.O.W.'s emerging less erectly from tiger cages, their legs often broken as part of sustained torture."

On PBS, Bill Moyers, the avuncular former close aide to Lyndon Johnson, interviewed General Maxwell Taylor, once upon a time the officer most respected by Kennedy-era Democrats: a moderate, an intellectual, even a liberal. Moyers asked him whether the "unworthy and unwinnable war" would sour young men on the military just as America was suspending the draft in favor of an all-volunteer force. General Taylor responded that the men returning from Vietnam would refuse that characterization. Moyers asked if that were so why record numbers of them had deserted. Taylor shot back that they had been poisoned by the media. Moyers pointed to the "excruciating anguish" expressed by the veterans who had actually learned about the war by, well, fighting in it. Taylor said these were the only ones a biased liberal media put on TV: "Where are the parades? The cheers?" Moyers asked why our allied European governments felt the same way. That, General Maxwell said, was because they read the U.S. press almost exclusively, which actually should have been subject to wartime censorship.

For this tribe of Americans, what Bill Moyers was doing honored the self-evident lesson of the 1960s and of the low, dishonest war that defined it: the imperative to question authority, unsettle ossified norms, excoriate dissembling leaders.

The other tribe of Americans found another lesson to be self-evident: never break faith with God's chosen nation, especially in time of war. They preferred leaders who spoke like the Fourth of July orators of the 1870s: "*Let us imitate the wisdom of the ancients and pledge ourselves here, upon this joyous, glorious day, to bury the past...and hand in hand...march forward with unity of purpose, to*

*enlarge the prosperity, garner the glory...deepen the patriotism, and render more enduring than any Egypt pyramid, our Republic..."*

They wanted their country back.

That was Richard Nixon's tribe, and in this war Richard Nixon's tribe would end up prevailing. Though Richard Nixon, like Moses, would not end up being the one who led them there.

The last Freedom Bird landed at Travis Air Force Base in California; a spontaneous chorus of "God Bless America" arose from the crowd of 6,500 that had awaited them through typhoon-like rains that tore off chunks of nearby buildings. A new round of national celebrations blossomed: local boys throwing out first pitches for opening day; drum and bugle corps; ice cream, steak; endless proud patriotic bluster from bunting draped platforms, culminating in the ceremonial bestowing of gifts to the former captives. Free use of a brand-new Ford LTD for a year. Free admission to Disney World. Free passes, plated in gold, to every Major League baseball game—forever.

On April 1 VIVA held a grand ball at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, with Governor Reagan playing proud host. Lorne Greene, who played a frontier patriarch on TV's *Bonanza*, introduced the distinguished personages on the dais, guests like John Wayne and astronaut Buzz Aldrin and Karl Maldin and Phil Silvers and Robert Stack and Connie Stevens and Edgar Bergen and Jack Benny. All wore POW bracelets. Singer Martha Raye, a veteran of USO tours in Southeast Asia, was escorted by a Green Beret, and wore a green beret too. Pat O'Brien—Knute Rockne in *Knute Rockne, All-American*—announced the presentation of colors and led the singing of the Star-Spangled banner. The President of Pepperdine University gave the invocation. He quoted Kipling: "Lord God of hosts, be with us yet, lest we forget."

The guests of honor marched forth in grand procession, two by two with their consorts, as the band struck up the anthem "Stout-Hearted Men":

*You who have dreams, if you act, they'll come true  
To turn your dreams to a fact, it's up to you  
If you have the soul and the spirit, ever fear it, you'll see it through-ough  
Hearts can inspire, other hearts with their fire  
For the strong obey, when a strong man shows them the way.*

*Give me some men who are started-hearted men, who will fight for the right they adore.  
Start me with men who are stout hearted men, and soon I'll give you ten thousand more....*

Lorne Greene gestured for silence—the man imprisoned the longest in Hanoi finally took the stage, ending the process. "Let it loose!" he commanded, and the crowd rose as one. The ovation lasted eight minutes.

Buzz Aldrich had walked on the moon. Now he made a presentation to Lieutenant David Rehman, a returned POW who had been carried through the streets of Hanoi. The evening's host, the governor of California, took to the podium and began to speak. His final peroration was addressed to the men: "You gave America back its soul. God bless a country that can produce men like you." He soon would sign a bill exempting them from state taxes on their earnings while in captivity—which could run, with combat pay and family allowances and retroactive promotions, to a lump sum, in 2010 figures, to half a million dollars. "It Won't Be Enough," read a headline in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Then Ronald Reagan flew east—"back on the sawdust trail," he told the cloud of reporters who had started following him everywhere because it looked like he might be running for president. To a

luncheon of Young Republicans in Washington he called the presidential election of 1972 "the most clear-cut choice in the last forty years," a "head-on confrontation between two opposing philosophies that have polarized this nation"; conservatism, Americanism, won, and would continue to win. They begged him to maintain an active standing as candidate for political office when he left the California governor's office in 1974. To New Orleans Republicans he extolled the virtues of free enterprise, cajoled them to elect more Republicans to lesser offices, boasted of his recent welfare reform in California and plugged his new tax limitation proposal. Then he brought up the stout-hearted men. But he had to apologize afterward to reporters: "I guess I'm going to have to quit talking about those fellows. I can't do it without choking up."

The reporters backstage followed up a bit rabidly—asking whether he wrote his own speeches; about the recent appearance on TV of the last movie he made, *The Killers*, the only one in which he played a villain ("I wish they would stop showing it"); about whether he was running for president. (They always asked that; he always demurred.)

And in Atlanta he called this business about the Watergate bugging a partisan witch hunt. The President already had his own Justice Department prosecuting the burglars, he pointed out—"What more can you ask?"

He struck reporters as foolishly blithe. One of the Watergate burglars had just told the nation that the White House had pressured him to lie, in a coverup he suspected went straight to the Oval Office, and that "members of my family have expressed fear for my life if I disclose the facts in this matter." Barry Goldwater said "it's beginning to be like Teapot Dome. There's a smell to it." Republican officials reported fundraising was near a standstill.

Reagan was calm. "This man has just been elected," he reassured the anxious Young Republicans in D.C. Republicans had a "2-to-1 majority philosophically," Watergate did not matter—except if the liberals who obsessively pursued what he privately called the president's "lynching" were allowed to let it matter. At his weekly press conference in Sacramento he said the President was "a truthful man." In Atlanta he praised Nixon for refusing to allow his aides to testify before the Senate investigating committee. A reporter promptly pointed out that, no, the President had recently reversed course and ordered his aides to cooperate. Indifferent the contradiction, he promptly said he supported that. And promptly dismissed the whole matter with a quip. Democrats were in hysterics about someone bugging their office? "It seems to me that they should have been happy that somebody was willing to listen to them."

Then he pushed off, to meet with 25 top Georgia Republican Party contributors.

Let others cry havoc. Just this sort of performance of blitheness in the face of what others called chaos was fundamental to who Ronald Reagan was. It was fundamental to why he made so many others feel so good. Which was fundamental to what he was to become, and the way he changed the United States.