

The Other America

There seems to be some disagreement as to the merits of life in America and as to the value of our accomplishments in Southeast Asia. The point of view of one side has been pretty well ventilated with increasing drama over the years. It varies from the more sedate statements of *The New York Times* to the frantic remarks of people like Philip Berrigan, Jane Fonda, and Ralph Abernathy. In February of 1971, Tom Wicker stated that "there is something illogical, but most dishonorable in his (the President's) strategy." As late as December of 1972, Anthony Lewis stated, "... the elected leader of the greatest democracy acts like a maddened tyrant ..." and in January, Mr. Lewis remarked that "even with sympathy for the men who fly American planes, and for their families, one has to recognize a greater courage of the North Vietnamese people. ..." Joseph Kraft, in November 1972, stated, "... we have been shamed as a nation ..." The May issue of *Newsweek* titled an article on our actions in Vietnam "The Spector of Defeat." In Congress, Congressman John G. Dow of New York spoke for the high-minded of his constituency when he announced: "the President is taking the risk of exterminating our civilization for a shabby purpose." And in the Senate, Senator George McGovern stated in June of 1972, "if we continue under the Nixon policy, we are not going to see our POWs again."

Those who disagree with this line do not often attract the attention of the above-quoted concerned citizens. Dissenters are rare, after all, and their point of view slips out only under the most unusual circumstances. In a recent instance, a group of fellows had to spend several years isolated in a foreign prison before they could stray from the sagacity of the media commentators. In fact, our POWs have managed to get into print certain sentiments which have not been seen in *The New York Times* since the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor (perhaps one way of getting these sentiments aired is to allow the entire nation to undergo one sort of tragedy or another).

One week before the POW arrival, columnist Madam Van Horne urged that the American public, before deluging the POWs with the best fruits of our decade— bell-bottoms, black power slogans, and the like— pause and reflect upon whatever they have to say. Once the first POWs had disembarked, Van Horne listened to about three sentences before suggesting that the whole show was programmed, and so washed her hands of the affair. One can easily sympathize with her perplexity and the media's fuss. For the confused and astounded and frenetic, the following remarks of the returning POWs could have aroused no greater excitement had they been the voices of three-headed Martians:

Navy Captain Jeremiah Denton, as a spokesman for the first plane-load of POWs to touch down in the Philippines, said: "We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our country under

difficult circumstances. We are profoundly grateful to our Commander-In-Chief and to our nation for this day." Then, choking up, he added, "God Bless America."

Air Force Colonel Robinson "Robbie" Risner, speaking for the second craft, said: "I would like to thank you all, the President and the American people, for bringing us home again. Thank you ever so much."

And as the formalities were dispensed with, Risner told an airport crowd, "I want to tell you something, folks. To us this is truly the land of milk and honey, the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Navy Captain James Mulligan Jr., for the third flight, said: "It has been our privilege to serve you Americans for these many years and during this time our faith in God, our country and in our families has never wavered. Today I'd like to thank the President of the United States, the people and our families for maintaining their faith in us and making this wonderful day possible." Then, looking down at the waiting crowd, he mused, "There's something great about kids waving American flags."

And then, as the men made their way from the plane to the buses, Air Force Captain Galand Kramer waved a sign he'd made while still in Hanoi which read: "GOD BLESS AMERICA AND NIXON" and one POW flashed a hand-towel upon which he stitched an outline map of the U.S. and the words "GOD BLESS AMERICA."

Colonel Richard Byrne told a crowd that had braved the snowy Dayton, Ohio weather: "Somehow I feel a little out of place, for in a way I feel that we should be giving you applause. Because it is you who have kept the faith in us — faith with us through the long years. It is you who have stood by us and effected our release. I owe you a debt of gratitude. Thank you all and thank you to our President."

Captain Burton W. Campbell told his airport crowd: "I have been trying to figure out something to convey to you how I feel ... the most appropriate thing I could say is thanks to President Nixon and most of all, thanks to you."

Air Force Colonel Ronald E. Byrne of New York City said: "To be back on American soil is a dream beyond our prayers. Thank you America for your unwavering support."

Navy Commander William Shankel said: "I want you to know we walked out of Hanoi winners and we're not coming home with our tails between our legs. We return with honor."

In a reflective mood, Navy Lieutenant Everett Alvarez Jr., the POW longest in captivity, said: "The U.S. is a great country. People don't realize what they have until they don't have it. We have many things to be thankful for, many things that are considered common. These are things I missed most."

As the tedious maneuvering of men through airports, hotels, and hospitals began to wind down, Alvarez said: "It

has been a long time coming but we are going home — home to the greatest country in the whole wide world."

"For years and years," he continued, "we dreamed of this day and we kept faith — faith in our God, in our President and in our country. It was this faith that maintained our hope that someday our dreams would come true and today they have. We have come home."

Navy Commander Brian Woods, who along with Air Force Major Glendon Perkins, were the first POWs to be returned, said: "This homecoming is not only for myself and Glendon Perkins but for all the POWs. We are grateful and overwhelmed. We are proud to serve our country and our Commander-In-Chief."

Then Perkins said that to return to "the greatest country in the world" is the "most wonderful experience in my life."

When three POWs visited the elementary school on Clark Air Base to thank the children for posters and place mats they had made to welcome the returnees to the base, Denton, speaking for his two colleagues, told the children: "I know that John and Bill are as overwhelmed as I in being with Little America."

He then read a letter from Risner which stated: "We will always remember you, the smiling faces, the waving hands, the waving flags — and we love you."

Air Force Colonel Ronald E. Byrne Jr., who has been a POW since 1965, said: "Thank you, America, for caring."

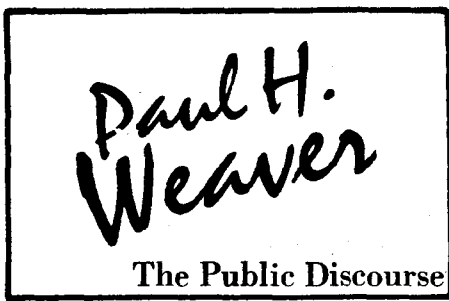
Captain James Stockdale, limping visibly, quoted Greek poetry to express himself: "Nothing is so sweet as to return from sea and listen to the raindrops on the roof of home." He added: "We're home ... America. America, God shed his grace on thee."

Navy Captain Wendell Rivers said: "I am very happy to come to my family, my friends, and my America."

Captain Mark Smith, who became known as the preacher of his camp, said: "I would just like to express to each and every one of you that it's wonderful to be back in the greatest country in the world, the greatest state in the world, and the greatest people in the world. God bless all of you and God bless America."

Navy Lieutenant Carl Galanti stated simply: "Freedom at last — that's what it's all about."

Yet no sooner had these men uttered their unfamiliar sentiments than the heralds of the New Age were again furiously pumping out sonorities from their inexhaustible resources of superior virtue. Jane Fonda, who had told us to expect a bunch of embittered peaceniks, had to revise her estimate and remind us that these men were more like murderers than heroes. The Blessed Father Berrigan forthrightly described them as "war criminals" and the ombudsman for *The Washington Post* tipped us all off to the fact that this POW episode was just another Pentagon Plot. Yes, America certainly has pulled itself together. All hail the New Age!



Play Theory

What we say to one another is a serious business: ideas have consequences. A good idea can bring forth all sorts of blessings; a bad one can make life miserable. One man's confused brainstorm today, if unexposed and unchecked, will become everybody's grotesque reality tomorrow. Given the penalties that attach to this reasoning, one might expect that public discussion would resemble the wise, benign seminars of geniuses and angels. In fact, it is more often just the opposite, and experience teaches us that we must keep a vigilant and critical eye on the public discourse simply to avoid disasters.

Why is this so? Well, some parts of the answer are clear enough. People have a seemingly endless capacity to make honest mistakes. Bad ideas are harder to recognize than we might wish. Then, too, certain people acquire an interest in the perpetuation of bad ideas because they can make a living from them, and this accounts for much of the nonsense perpetrated by politicians, advertisers, and other such publicizing persons. Yet, more important than why nonsense exists is the question: why do we take it? And not merely take it, enjoy it? Our infirmities can account for a lot of what we do — but clearly not for all. People, after all, are not total dummies, and total dummies are what we would have to be to swallow the most flagrant nonsense of our editorialists, columnists, professors, and politicians. We need to find the missing link in our explanation.

Several years ago, a psychologist by the name of William Stephenson published a fascinating book called *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*. Its thesis was that people derive pleasure, not only from the *content* of communication, but also from the simple *act* of communication. We read, for instance, not only because we want to know what's going on, but also because we enjoy exercising the skills of reading. Thus, one reason we take and enjoy nonsense is that we often don't care whether what we are reading makes sense or not — so long as we are in fact reading it and enjoying the pleasures of reading *per se*. Indeed, we do not even care whether what we read has any content whatsoever.

Now I could go on at some length explaining Stephenson's subtle and elegant thesis—but I am not so sure that I am willing to count on your reading-pleasure alone to carry you through to the end of this column. So I propose to offer you instead an inspired piece of writing that is utterly without "con-

tent" and yet is still capable of arousing emotion and reader interest. The first time you read it, it will seem rather strange. The second time through, you will be amused. The third time you read it—and it bears even a third reading—you will see how acute Stephenson's theory is, and how completely one can become engrossed into a reading that says literally nothing. The article was written by Tom Johnson and was published in *The Village Voice* on June 1, 1972. Entitled "An Inside View of Bangkok," it is in its entirety that which follows:

I should admit at the outset that the title of this article is a lie. Not that it isn't a good idea. I suppose if I had been to Bangkok and felt that I had some kind of inside view, I might write an article on that subject. But since that is not the case, it would be presumptuous for me to do so. Perhaps it was wrong to select such a title in the first place. Yet an article does require a title, and it is impossible to devise a title for an article of this nature which will not be misleading in one way or another. You will understand what I mean if you continue reading for a while. Or perhaps you will not wish to read further now that you have been told that the article is not about Bangkok. But I am sure you have other interests aside from Bangkok. So perhaps you will continue reading, if only to find out what the article really is about.

Some readers will already have turned the pages to something else, but most will no doubt read on into this second paragraph despite the disconcerting nature of the first one. Some will be reading faster and more skeptically now than when they began. A few will be reading more slowly and with increased interest. Most will be proceeding on the assumption that the writer has simply chosen a very indirect way of introducing his subject, and that the article will soon begin to present concrete ideas of some sort or another. A few will already be suspicious that the article is going to continue in much the same way it began. Of course, the latter are correct. Though there are still many paragraphs remaining, they are all written in more or less similar style, and none of them deal with any subject in the usual sense. So readers who are only interested in reading *about* something would be well advised to turn to something else at this point. Those who continue reading should do so without any great anticipation of something to come. If they read expecting the

article to make some point, they will only be disappointed when they discover that it does not lead up to anything in particular. But many articles which claim to be informing the reader are equally uninformative. And the idea that people read in order to gain information is largely an illusion anyway, since most of the time when people read they are not gaining information so much as simply exercising a skill they have learned.

While I am not concerned with informing or entertaining readers in the usual way, I do not wish to disappoint anyone. Thus I feel obliged to warn the reader not to anticipate anything. I realize it is difficult to read without anticipating, but readers who can manage to do so will find the article much more enjoyable than readers who can not. Meanwhile, I shall do my best to try to help everyone read the article with a minimum of boredom and disappointment. Perhaps the best advice I can provide at this point is that you skip the following paragraph, which is probably the least interesting one in the article. Of course, you may read it if you like, and I imagine most readers who have ventured this far into the article will not be able to overlook it completely.

If, despite advice to the contrary, you find yourself reading this paragraph, you should at least not read every word. If you do insist on reading every word, I can not accept any responsibility in the event that you become bored. And you probably will become bored by the redundancy and the lack of content. So please skim over the sentences so as not to waste any more time on them than necessary. If you are still reading every word, you will no doubt be quite disappointed by the time you conclude the paragraph and discover that it really does not say anything. You will become bored with the redundancy and the lack of content. If, despite advice to the contrary, you still find yourself reading this paragraph, you should at least try not to read every word. You will become bored by the redundancy and the lack of content. So please skim over the sentences so as not to waste any more time on them than necessary. If you do insist on reading every word, I can not accept any responsibility in the event that you become bored.

Even though this article does not pertain to Bangkok, it seems only right that I should refer again to "An Inside View of Bangkok," and thus make some attempt to relate article with title.

If the reader did not know quite what to think when I warned him initially not to anticipate anything from this article, he will now have a better understanding of what I meant. The article began with a discussion of its erroneous title, proceeded with a few remarks about how readers would react to the article and some warnings about what to expect. It then led into an unnecessary paragraph which the reader was asked to skim, followed by an unnecessary reference to the title and an unnecessary recapitulation of all these things. In all, it has been quite uninformative.

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