
Defense Report

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Human Rights—A Two-way Street

A Presidential Commission has recently returned from Southeast Asia after another unsuccessful attempt to get some specific accounting of the hundreds of U.S. servicemen still carried as missing in action. The mission did recover the remains of eleven men already believed to be dead but beyond that the only result was a repetition of Vietnamese demands to be fulfilled as a condition to any further MIA accounting.

As it has in the past, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam continues to insist on substantial aid for its reconstruction program and for normalization of relations with the United States. But a new demand has been added. The Vietnamese say they will establish a bureau to seek information on the U.S. missing if the United States provides material resources to support the effort.

We have never been able to confirm the validity of claims that President Nixon promised a multi-billion dollar aid program as part of his peace settlement. But whether or not that claim by the Vietnamese has any foundation the whole idea smacks of extortion. In this case it seems more likely that information is being held for ransom, not living prisoners—information that will confirm the status of sons, husbands and fathers.

It seems inconceivable that President Carter, with his widely publicized championing of human rights in Latin America, the Soviet Union and elsewhere, might stand still for this kind of arm-twisting. The next-of-kin of the missing have the right to end their anxiety. The hundreds of thousands of former soldiers, politicians and ordinary citizens of the late Republic of Vietnam who seem doomed to the purgatory of "retraining camps" for holding a differing political position, are certainly being deprived of the human right to be with their families and to lead a normal life.

And yet President Carter told a news conference following the return of the commission that it had a "completely successful mission." He also concluded that the Vietnamese had acted in good faith.

Most Americans found our failure to win the war in Vietnam a bewildering experience alien to the American ethic. Having to pander to a recent adversary for the simple right to know as much as possible about almost a thousand missing men is equally as puzzling to most.

President Carter must take the middle ground between acquiescence and belligerency. He must preserve our right to be proud of our country while, at the same time, upholding the dignity of frustrated families.