

In the past three decades perhaps only the first moon walk has exceeded the release of our prisoners of war in its emotional impact and media coverage. For weeks before the process of release actually began our attention became increasingly drawn to the event by the immense preparations that were being made to make their return swift and their transition to freedom gentle. Millions wondered what it must feel

like to be in their place and come home after so long. There was no shortage of professional advise to assist us in our wondering. We were forewarned that everything from a difficult adjustment to western food to a complete state of disorientaion was to be expected. Anything was possible. In some cases prolonged periods of psychiatric care might be necessary, but for most of the men love, understanding and the passage of time would cure everything. To insure that financial pressures played no part in slowing the process of adjustment the government promised back pay in full, and generous compensating awards running in some instances into the tens of thousands of dollars. These men were returning heros and a grateful country understoed what their experience had done to them and would provide whatever was required to ease the pain of re-entry, regardless of how long it took or how expensive it was. Nothing would be spared. At no time in our history was this nation more aware of the psychological and social problems facing men being released from periods of incarceration. It is because of this unique time of public interest, awareness and sensativity that this opportunity to draw attention to the horrors of our own penal system must not be missed. Because for the individual concerned, as it effects their psche, their spirits, their families and their their ability to function sanely, there is almost no difference whether they spent five years in a North Vietnamese prison camp or in San Quentin. In fact there is reason to believe that in many ways the San Quentin experience may be more harmful. The inmate of San Quentin is released with seventy eight dollars in his pocket to get him home, pay the first and last month's rent and tide him over while he finds a job and adjusts to the outside world. Even his own fellow countrymen will in all liklihood shun him. The fact that our Prisoners of War have been convicted of no crime and are heros, while the inmate of San Quentin may be a thief and rougue does not alter the reality that prisons tend to harm and ruin human beings. Sinners fare no better than saints when kept in cages. In times of war there is little we can do to stop the enemy from putting our captured military people in cages. But when we do it to ourselves, to our own citizens, and then wonder why they behave oddly when they are released, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Over ninety five percent of the people we put away will one day be let out, and whatever was wrong with them when they went in wasn't helped by being imprisoned. Abnormal conditions do not produce normal people. There are over five hundred American Prisoners of War returning from their prisons in South East Asia and their are over Five hundred thousand Americans serving time right here in the United States. It is in the interest of everyone of us that both groups of individuals make it when they get home.