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# War Prisoner Swap Attempts Are Agonizing

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WASHINGTON — Behind the scenes of the Viet Nam war an agonizing attempt goes on to swap prisoners of war with the Viet Cong.

But the failure of all efforts thus far is forcing a reappraisal of the U.S. government's role in dealing with the problem of wartime prisoner exchanges. Is enough being done? Are the right things being done?

It is natural that in a war public concern should be directed primarily at the mounting lists of dead and wounded. The tragic plight of the prisoners, however, has recently been dramatized by the apparent collapse of a hoped-for swap of highlevel Agency for International Development official Augustus Hertz with a Viet Cong terrorist held by South Viet Nam.

## SETS PATTERN

The secret efforts to free Hertz, who was seized by Viet Cong while riding a bicycle in a Saigon suburb last February, have involved Sen. Robert Kennedy; Chester Cooper, former White House special assistant; Abba Schwartz, former administrator of the bureau of security and consular affairs, as well as the distraught Hertz family and several private citizens.

The Hertz case focused attention on the fact that the United States has no apparatus for keeping track of the fate of prisoners; no one agency or individual with specific responsibility for attempting to gain their freedom; no system for providing information and guidance, or possibly a little comfort, to their families; and no organized method of coordinating the efforts of the U.S. government and independent bodies like the International Red Cross.

The Viet Nam prisoners are the current problem, but the way they are handled sets the pattern for possible future difficulties elsewhere — if the United States should find itself one day fighting in the Dominican Republic again, for instance. There are now 212 U.S. military men missing and believed to be prisoners of the Viet Cong. Five U.S. civilians are captive, including Hertz, three missionaries, and Douglas Ramsey, a foreign service official assigned to AID.

A variation of the problem exists in Cuba, where 1,000 U.S. citizens and their dependents have applied to leave the country but are forbidden to go by the Castro government. They are not prisoners in the strictest sense, for they are not held behind barbed wire; yet they are not free to do as they

wish and come home, either.

Cooper, who left the White House staff last month, would like to see a new emphasis and direction put upon U.S. efforts to free prisoners of war. He is now preparing a long report which he plans to send to the State Department next week in which he will propose a new inter-agency prisoner coordinating committee.

Such a committee was first suggested by A. Burke Hertz, a Virginia lawyer who is the prisoner's brother. Hertz felt that a special body was needed to stimulate the efforts of the Red Cross and others and to

coordinate the information and ideas of the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense.

## SENATE ROLE

Because of his chairmanship of a subcommittee on refugees, Sen. Edward Kennedy has also become interested in improving the techniques of attempting prisoner exchanges. Kennedy has insistently pressured the State Department to pay more attention to both the question of caring for refugees and of rescuing prisoners in foreign countries.

Kennedy believes the Red Cross is the best agency to negotiate an exchange and has had several conferences with Red Cross officials on the sub-

ject. He has promised to dig deeper into the problem at a hearing on Vietnamese refugees scheduled for early May.

Concerned officials, of course, realize that negotiations for prisoner swaps are very sensitive and must be conducted in secret. And they know that if the Viet Cong is in no mood for exchanges, no exchanges can be made, no matter what the United States does.

Yet there is ample precedent for prisoner of war exchanges, and therefore enough hope to warrant continued efforts. During the Indochinese war, for example, the French and Vietnamese were able to exchange prisoners despite their bitter hatred.