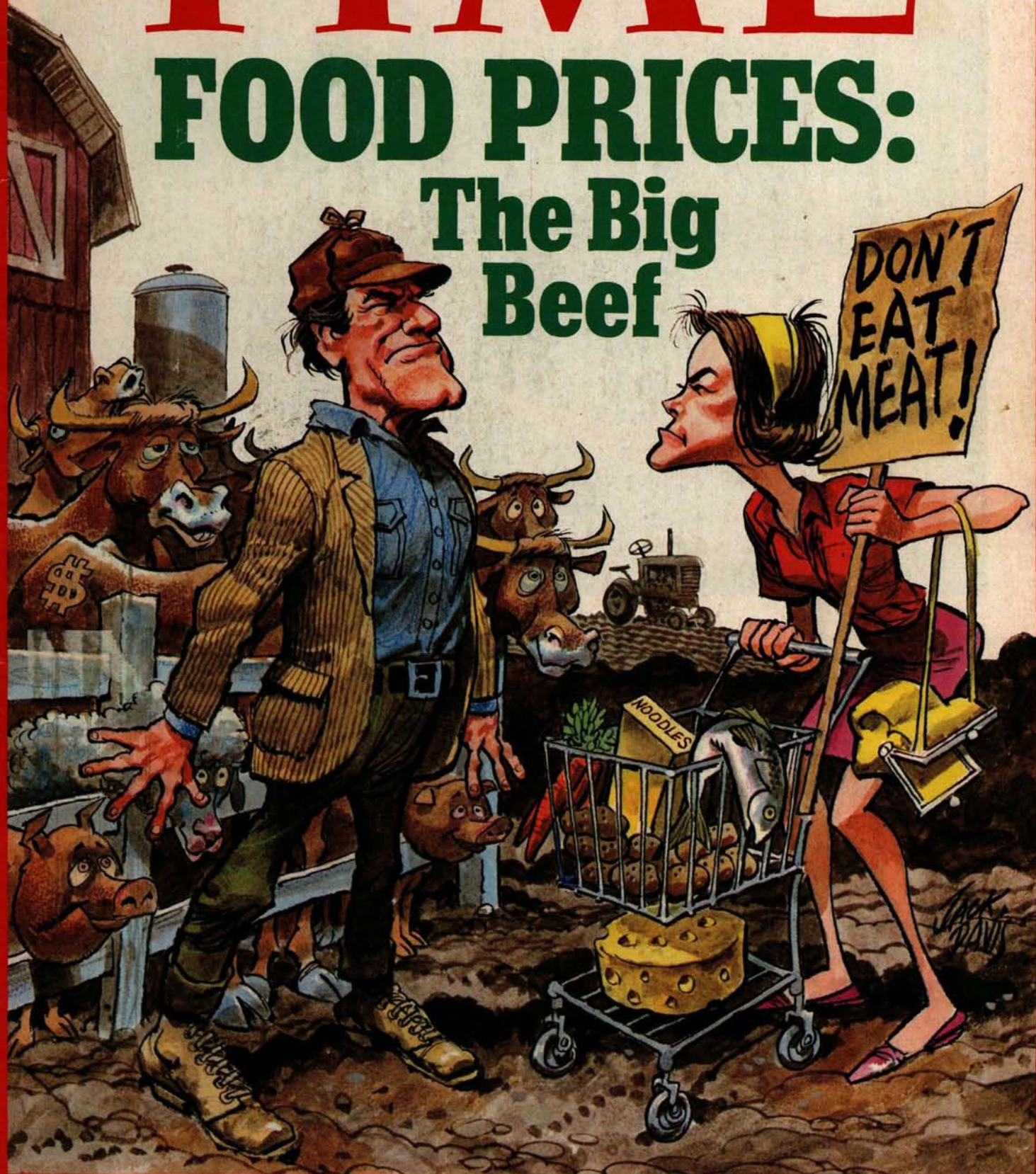


TIME

FOOD PRICES:

The Big Beef



P.O.W.S

At Last the Story Can Be Told

FOR weeks the returned P.O.W.s had been stepping from "freedom birds" onto the television screens—most of them saluting crisply, walking smartly, looking physically fit and acting mentally alert. As the nation's early apprehensions faded, a new idea set in: perhaps the P.O.W.s had been humanely treated after all. That illusion was shattered last week. With all the known surviving prisoners safely home from Viet Nam, the dam of restraints broke, and tales of mistreatment and torture poured forth. Navy Commander Richard Stratton, best known for his deep bows and seemingly drugged appearance in a 1967 news conference, summed up the reports of many prisoners when he said: "I have been tortured, I have been beaten, I have been placed in solitary confinement, I have been harassed, I have been humiliated." Navy Lieut. Commander Rodney Knutson struck the same harsh note. "Lenient and humane treatment?" he asked. "Not on your life!"

Prisoners detailed a mosaic of torture ranging from the brutally physical to the ingeniously psychological. They conceded that treatment had varied for each P.O.W., that conditions had improved remarkably by the fall of 1969, and that high-ranking officers had absorbed the worst of it. But mistreatment was clearly widespread, and often brought on by the prisoners' steadfast resistance. As Navy Captain Jeremiah Denton said, "We forced them to be brutal to us." Even those who considered their treatment comparatively mild, such as Air Force Captain Joseph Milligan, often suffered enormously. Provided totally inadequate medical attention, Milligan treated—and cured—a badly burned arm by letting maggots eat away the pus, then cleaning off the maggots with his own urine.

The favorite props of the North Vietnamese captors were lengths of rope, iron manacles that could be screwed down to the bone and fan belts for administering beatings. Prisoners claimed that they were tied up for interminable periods into positions that yogis could not assume. Ropes tied to a man's ankles, wrists and neck were tightened until he was bent over backward in a doughnut shape. Men were also bent forward into a position of a baby sucking its big toe. The ropes cut off circulation, and in several cases paralyzed limbs for months, even years.

Raw Flesh. Handcuffs on the wrists of one prisoner were tightened so much that blood came through the pores. Hands and feet often swelled to unimaginable proportions and turned black. Jaws, noses, ribs, teeth and limbs, the prisoners charged, were deliberately broken and left unset. The sick and wounded were left in their own excrement for days on end. Fan belts or

lengths of rubber turned buttocks of beaten prisoners into raw flesh. Sergeant Don MacPhail said that he was hung from a tree over three fresh graves and beaten with sticks. He was told that he would be in the fourth grave.

Many U.S. senior officers and uncooperative prisoners of lower rank were held in solitary confinement. Navy Captain James Mulligan was kept alone for 3½ years. Colonel Robinson Risner for 4½ years, and Air Force Colonel Fred Cherry for two years—with an unintended infected shoulder. Said Mulligan last week, "You're isolated in a small cell, with no sound, no fresh air. I was kept like an animal in a solid cage, worse than an animal. I couldn't even see out. I didn't see the moon for four years."

Fish Heads. Before 1969 food was kept at near starvation level at the more severe camps. For many prisoners, there were only two meals a day, six hours apart, and they might consist of nothing more than a bowl of watery soup, occasionally with a fish head in it. The bread was often wormy and the rice sandy. Lieut. Commander Knutson said that he and his fellow prisoners ate with one hand on their rice and the other on their soup bowl in order to keep the cockroaches from taking over.

Much of the torture was intended to force "confessions" or extract information. Often prisoners were beaten until unconscious to get them to sign statements about the "humanity" of their treatment. U.S. officials figure that as many as 95% of the P.O.W.s captured before 1970 were tortured. Almost all broke. Said Navy Captain Allen Brady: "I never met a man with whom they were not able to gain at least some of

their objectives." Most felt, as did Army Major Floyd J. Thompson, that "these propagandist statements just weren't worth dying for."

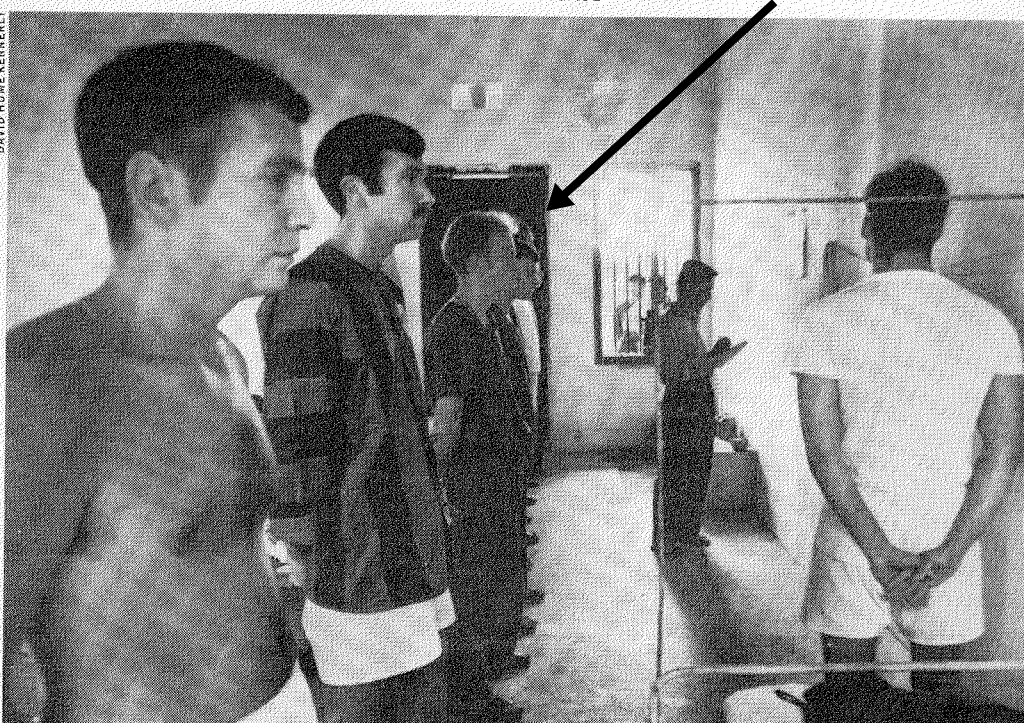
There were partial victories. When interrogators put a pistol to Captain Milligan's head to force him to give some intelligence, he gambled that none of the officers present understood English and wrote nonsense after each question. Navy Captain James Stockdale never broke. Asked for information about U.S. ships, he drew a picture of an aircraft carrier with a swimming pool and 300-ft. keel. Navy Lieut. Commander John McCain III once listed the offensive line of the Green Bay Packers as the members of his squadron.

Defense Department officials believe that many of the 55 men listed as having died in captivity in North Viet Nam did so at the hands of torturers. According to several P.O.W.s, Air Force Major Edwin Atterberry, one of two prisoners who escaped and were recaptured in 1969, was beaten to death.

Although there seemed to be far fewer beatings at the hands of the Viet Cong, conditions in the South held their own horror. One prisoner was buried up to his neck for days. Another, who was suffering from dysentery, was denied medical assistance and finally suffocated in his own excrement. For those well enough to walk, there were endless work details. Army Major William Hardy, captured in 1967, figures that the Viet Cong "treated me like a slave" because he is black and "they believed all they heard about Negroes still being treated like slaves in the U.S."

Colonel Risner named Oct. 15, 1969 as the beginning of improvement in the prisoners' treatment. The credit for the change seems to belong to all the people who tried at about that time to focus world attention on the plight of the P.O.W.s—President Nixon, the wives of

AMERICAN P.O.W.s AT "THE ZOO" IN HANOI JUST BEFORE RELEASE



DAVID HUME KENNEDY