



# The Phyllis Schlafly Report



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## What Our POWs Can Teach Us About America

*Address by Phyllis Schlafly to New Citizens at the Naturalization Ceremonies for the Eastern District of Missouri at the Federal Building in St. Louis, August 3, 1973.*

I often wonder what foreign visitors and new citizens think of America before they come here, and how the reality compares with their expectations. Before they come, they surely have heard what a great country this is; how we have developed a system which is the marvel of the world; and that we have more spiritual and material benefits than any other nation has ever enjoyed: more freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of press, freedom to choose your line of work, to change your job, and to move to another community.

They must have heard also about our abundant prosperity: better homes, better food, better hospitals and medical care, and more of the good things of life than any other nation has ever enjoyed. Surely they have heard also how dramatically American food is desired by most other countries in the world; and that the American farmer is so efficient that he is able to feed himself and 58 other people on a high protein diet, and still we can export half our great grain crop.

After foreign visitors and new citizens arrive in our country, I wonder what kind of impression they get. If they read our newspapers, they are surfeited with stories about crime in the streets and corruption in our government. If they watch television or go to the movies, they can hardly get away from depressing doses of ugly (not loving) sex, bloody violence, and the Watergate scandals. To the foreign visitor and perhaps to the new American, it may look as though everybody in the government is crooked, and everybody is spying on everyone else.

I wonder how long it takes a visitor or new citizen to see through this depressing picture of America and discover what is great and good about America. I wonder if they think America must be divinely blessed, or terribly lucky, to have so much individual freedom and so much affluence in spite of the criminals and all the unsavory people we see and read about in the news.

I would like to suggest to you today that America is great because of the great people we have had in the past — and still have today. I'm not talking just about our national heroes such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Every nation

has its heroes who are especially honored. Today, I am talking about the ordinary, run-of-the-mill Americans who have put their lives on the line for the United States. These are the people who are the heart of America and who have made it such a great country.

### Their Lives and Fortunes

The Fourth of July is the birthday of our country, the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When those 56 men signed their names on that document, every one took the deliberate risk of ending up on the gallows. You know how the words of the Declaration of Independence end: "For the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

Those were not empty words or oratorical bombast. Those 56 men paid a high price for their courage. Most of them did, in fact, sacrifice their lives or their fortunes, or both, for American independence. Five were captured and tortured by the British; nine died from wounds of war; 12 had their homes pillaged and destroyed; two lost their sons in battle; others were tracked down and persecuted for their patriotism. Most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence died broke: their homes had been looted, their fortunes spent or stolen because of the stand they took for American independence.

One little-known signer fascinates me in particular. He was a wealthy Virginian named Thomas Nelson, Jr., who joined the fighting forces of George Washington and became a Brigadier General. Toward the end of the Revolution, as the battle of Yorktown approached, the British General, Cornwallis, made his headquarters in the beautiful Nelson home. The siege of Yorktown lasted three weeks. In order to force Cornwallis to surrender, Nelson personally directed the American forces to fire on his own beautiful home and destroy it.

The war ended soon after, but that did not end the cost of the war to Thomas Nelson. He had raised a needed \$200,000,000 for George Washington's troops by using his own property as collateral. The

government never reimbursed him, and his property was forfeited when the loans came due. His health and fortune ruined, he died a few years later.

This was the kind of personal sacrifice repeated over and over again during the American Revolution. Oh, you've heard about famous heroes such as Nathan Hale and John Paul Jones; but the Revolution was won by hundreds of others whose names are not known to history. They were the people who created this great country which we enjoy today.

Some people will say that that kind of courage and self-sacrifice is a thing of the past, that America doesn't produce that kind of man any more. Now we have hippies, drug addicts, wiretappers, burglars, influence peddlers, armed robbers, and sadistic murderers. There is much evidence of a sad deterioration in the moral fabric of our country.

However, I would like to suggest to our new citizens that we still do have the same kind of people who signed the Declaration of Independence. We still do have millions of people who are cut from the same cloth as those who sacrificed their lives and fortunes nearly 200 years ago.

### **The 596 POWs**

How do I know? Because I have read the stories of our POWs: our Prisoners of War who served in Vietnam. They have proved that patriotism, courage and stamina are not relics of a bygone era. There were 596 of our POWs who came back in 1973. Only after they had all returned did they begin to talk about what they had suffered during the one to eight years they were imprisoned by the Communists in Southeast Asia. These authentic, true-life, eyewitness stories of the prisoners of war came as a stunning surprise to millions of Americans. It was a shock to many of our citizens to learn that Communist captors could be so evil.

In the first place, some 45 percent of our servicemen who were captured by the enemy in Vietnam failed to survive because of torture or lack of medical care. You noticed when you saw our POWs on television that there were hardly any amputees among them. That was because the Communists didn't bother to care for those who were seriously injured; they were just left to die.

When the POWs who returned began to tell us what it was like to be a prisoner of the Communists, they gave us a powerful lesson in the facts of life in the world today.

For example, Army Chief Warrant Officer James Hestand, a helicopter pilot, was chained to a stake with a leg iron like a dog for two years. At another time, he was kept in a cage with poisonous snakes and spiders.

Major Thomas E. Norris, who was a prisoner for six years, was subjected to what was called the "pretzel torture": a vicious double hammer-lock was applied over the head and shoulders, and then nylon straps were tied to the limbs, and pulled and twisted in order to cut off the circulation. For two years he was not permitted to talk above a whisper.

Air Force Major Philip E. Smith, a prisoner for seven and a half years, was shackled in a "torture cuff" until the flesh completely hid the tight metal bands. He said the pain in his shoulder was so bad that "it would have been fun to have had a knife jabbed into it."

Colonel Robinson Risner eloquently described the solitary confinement which many of our Prisoners of War were subjected to for long periods of time. Solitary, that is, except for the rats and roaches. He said: "Can you imagine someone putting you in a closet and closing the door and saying, 'See you in six months'?" Another time, he was tied so tightly in a ball that his shoulders popped out of their sockets and his toes were pushed into his mouth.

### **A Firing Squad Would Be Easier**

Lieutenant Colonel John Dunn said it would have been easier to face a firing squad than the "continuous high level of pain" which was inflicted on him and the other POWs.

Lieutenant Charles D. Rice told how the Communists put an iron bar in his mouth to keep him from screaming in pain. The Communists tied his legs to cut off the circulation, thus causing him excruciating pain. A prisoner for six years, he was often kicked in the head and in the kidneys.

Pilot Ernest Brace spent three and a half years in a bamboo cage in the jungle with his feet in stocks and an iron collar around his neck with a rope tied to it. At one time, he spent a week buried in the ground up to his neck.

Navy Lieutenant Commander Rodney K. Knutson described his eight-year experience as a POW like this: "I was tortured, I was beaten. I have had my teeth broken, my nose broken, my wrists broken. I have suffered injuries all at the hands of the Vietnamese at torture sessions. Lenient and humane treatment? Not on your life!" He added that he was beaten with a club on his buttocks hour after hour until they were "like hamburger. Blood spattered the walls whenever the club came down."

Reading horror stories like this is very depressing. But I hope you won't be like some friends I have who have become so depressed reading about the evils of smoking — that they have decided to give up reading. It is good for all of us to keep reading the experiences of our POWs. As we listen to their true-life stories, the particular qualities of Americans come shining through. One of these qualities, for example, is the traditional American resourcefulness.

### **Resisting the Professionals**

Our Prisoners of War recognized very quickly that the Communists were professionals, not amateurs, when it came to applying torture. One of their major aims was to isolate the American prisoners in order to make each man feel absolutely alone. Our POWs showed their resourcefulness and ingenuity by developing a very intricate communication system among the men in the prison camps. They developed a deaf-mute sign language which was more rapid than talking. They developed a modified Morse code, which they all learned very quickly, and which could be used to communicate with each other not only by tapping on walls, but by whistling, by the rhythm of a sweeping broom, or by chopping or digging in the ground. The customary "alert" or "call up" sign to a fellow prisoner in a cell on the other side of the wall was the typically American expression, "Shave and a haircut." The other prisoner would answer, "Two bits," and their communication system would be operational.

"Resist" was the underlying and everlasting motto of our Prisoners of War. "Resist" was the word which came out most clearly in all their communications with each other. Each man helped the other to sustain his strength and his morale to *resist* -- week after week, month after month, year after year. Everything the Americans said, everything they did, carried messages from one man to another. The ingenious primitive communications system developed by our Prisoners of War was worthy of the nation which has produced the marvels of modern communication: telegraph, telephone, radio and television.

The American prisoners did other things with their time besides send each other messages. They made poker chips and dice out of hardened bits of bread. Many ran 50 laps around the cell each day to keep in shape, or used water buckets to lift weights, or practiced handstands. Some who were interested in mathematics worked out complex formulas in their heads; of course, no writing paper was allowed. One man gave lessons in music appreciation, another lessons in Spanish. One man had worked in a theater and could recite entire plots of movies.

### **They Could Even Laugh**

Even under the grimmest of circumstances, our Prisoners of War kept their sense of humor. This was quite apparent in the names they gave the prison camps. The main prison camp was called the Hanoi Hilton. The place where the men were thrown after their torture and interrogation was called Heartbreak Hotel. The camp where they all felt like animals because the guards looked at them through little peepholes was called the Zoo. They had a camp which was known as Little Las Vegas, and the various buildings in it were named after those plush and lavish hotels in Las Vegas, Nevada, such as Thunderbird, Stardust, Riviera, Gold Nugget, and Desert Inn.

Other delightfully American names for the POW camps were the Plantation, the Stable, the Office, Dogpatch, Skid Row, the Poolroom, the Pentagon, the Pigsty, and Alcatraz. Our men conjured up humorous names for the brutal Communist guards who interrogated and terrorized them, such as Mickey Mouse, the Cat, the Rabbit, Slopehead, and the Bug.

Our POWs could even laugh about how the bread they were served often had cigarette butts and insects in it. Instead of complaining, they referred to the unwelcome items in their bread as "crispy critters." They labeled the brand of toothpaste they were issued, "Ugh."

Air Force Captain John Borling, who was a prisoner for six and a half years, had his hands and legs in irons a good bit of the time. He was given no medical care for his broken back. He was put through 72 sleepless hours of interrogation and degradation until his arms and hands were numb. His Communist captors finally let him take a shower, but his hands were so numb and weak that he couldn't hold the piece of soap. He was in such pain that he couldn't stand up, and he slumped down in the water. The final frustration was when the soap slipped away and washed down the drain. In the depths of his agony and despair, he screamed out in pain. In so doing, he looked up high, and there, on a wooden beam, an American who had been in that same spot before him, had penciled the words, "Smile —

you're on candid camera." He thought, if some other guy could laugh in such misery, he could laugh, too.

### **Survival Through Faith**

One lesson comes out loud and clear from the reports of our Prisoners of War. The men who survived were those who had faith in God and in America. Those who did not have such faith, did not survive.

Captain James Mulligan, Jr., was one of the senior officers who were given the worst treatment. He was a prisoner for seven years, during which time he was stoned, beaten and kicked. He was kept 42 months in solitary confinement. (Three months was the maximum period in solitary confinement permitted for our most hardened criminals at Alcatraz, and hardly any were ever kept more than two weeks.) When he returned home, he explained: "The real thing that kept me going was the fact that I kept faith in what I believed in: my God, my country and my family."

Captain Jeremiah Denton described his imprisonment this way: "I was tortured seven days and six nights in a pitch black room. They beat me regularly and brutally while I was in irons with my hands tightly cuffed behind me." Like many prisoners, he was forced to kneel on concrete floors for days until his knees swelled up like balloons.

Captain Denton described how he was given the torture known as "the stool." He was made to sit on a low stool with his arms handcuffed behind him for 20 days with no sleep. When he would start to fall asleep, the guards would hit him under the nose. This was one of the numerous torture techniques perfected by the Communists which would leave a minimum of visible marks afterwards. Instead of hitting our men on top of the nose to break it, they would hit them under the nose to cause pain without a break.

Captain Denton was the first of our Prisoners of War to return. When he stepped up to the microphone, his first words were, "God bless America." He went on to say: "We are happy to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances." Somebody asked him what it was that kept up the morale of our POWs. He replied, "I think 99 percent would say it was faith in God, and, second, faith in country."

Air Force Captain John Borling told how he sustained himself at one low point of his imprisonment: he dragged himself across the floor of his cell to a "talking hole" and held a secret religious service with another prisoner at the other end of the hole.

Major Thomas E. Norris told how men of all religious denominations knelt together on the stone prison floor, under fear of punishment, and prayed to God for faith and freedom. The setting of their secret worship was a dingy cell with a homemade tinfoil cross, a rosary made from dried bread crumbs and pieces of an old toothpaste tube, and Bible verses scrawled on scraps of paper. Major Norris told how the guards would intimidate, threaten and break up their religious services. He pinpointed their motive in doing this in these words: "The Communists divert their own people's basic need for belief in a higher Power into an allegiance of the power of the state."

Major Norman McDaniel, a black POW imprisoned six and a half years, confirmed the fact that religious faith was essential to survival as a POW. He said: "Having faith in God, in our country, and in our fellow Americans, we felt we could endure as long as necessary. . . . I have become more proud of our country and our way of life."

Captain David E. Gray, Jr., said: "A loving God made me an American, and to America I return." Captain Mark Smith must have expressed the views of all our returning servicemen when he said, "Conditions in the United States are so good."

Navy Commander Raymond Vohden, who spent eight years as a Prisoner of War, really revealed the stamina and perseverance of our soldiers when he said: "We would have been willing to stay another ten years in prison to achieve an honorable peace. We wouldn't have been happy about it, but we would have accepted it."

### "Masters of Deception"

The highest ranking American prisoner held by the North Vietnamese was Colonel John Peter Flynn. He spent three years in solitary confinement, had two legs and an arm immobilized from injuries and torture so that he was completely helpless for much of the time, and was subjected to very heavy torture. After returning home, he described his state of mind like this: "When a man is alone with his enemies, and is being tortured, there is nothing much for him to cling to except his individual integrity, his faith in his country, and his belief in God."

Colonel Flynn was the senior officer of 520 POWs in one camp. Colonel Flynn figured out quickly how the Communists use psychological warfare as well as physical torture against the American POWs. He described it this way: "They were consummate masters at deception. Using the 'Judas Goat' principle, they had tried to get junior officers to think the seniors were cooperating and the new prisoners to think the old ones had cooperated before them. Their idea was to make each man feel he was alone and that resistance was futile . . ."

Because he understood the Communist tactics, Colonel Flynn was able to sustain the morale of the other men, keep them inspired, and give them a motto on which they could resist, day after dreary, tortured day. Some were even tortured to say they had not been tortured. Colonel Flynn's motto was: "Return with honor." And they did. Through years of isolation from church, country and family, victimized by Communist psychological techniques and compelled to live in an information vacuum, our POWs held fast.

### "Just Average Americans"

Were all these courageous POWs a heroic breed of men cut from some finer cloth than the rest of us? After reading their stories, I believe they were just average American guys. I believe that is what the average American is like. I think that 99 percent of the some 2,000,000 American servicemen who saw duty in Vietnam would have behaved about the same. That is certainly the way our POWs themselves feel about it.

Take, for example, Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain III, who spent five and a half years as a

prisoner and almost died from the torture, filth and lack of medical care. After he returned, he said, "Basically, we feel that we are just average American Navy, Marine and Air Force pilots who got shot down. Anybody else in our place would have performed just as well." Commander McCain went on to say, "I had a lot of time to think over there, and came to the conclusion that one of the most important things in life — along with a man's family — is to make some contribution to his country."

Commander McCain did make a great contribution to his country. Without passing judgment on the war itself, we can all join in saying that our POWs are a tremendous inspiration. They prove what America is really like. They were faced with every temptation and torture to betray America, yet they kept their personal honor and loyalty to their country, and even their unique American resourcefulness and sense of humor.

### "Make Some Contribution"

Commander McCain, however, gave us one warning for the future: "America will have other wars to fight until the Communists give up their doctrine of the violent overthrow of our way of life."

We should take his warning to heart. Our POWs had a good look at the evil face of Communism, and they know the Communists are professionals in the pursuit of their goals. In the face of this enemy, we must remember, as it says in that famous television singout *Up With People*, "Freedom isn't free. You've got to pay a price, You've got to sacrifice, For your liberty."

There are a great many enemies and termites working to undermine our great country, both from within and from without. We need the help of all our citizens, including our new ones. As new citizens, you may realize more than some of our natives what a very precious prize we have here in America. As new citizens, you may have a keener realization of how great our country really is, and how viciously evil our enemies are.

At the end of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman came up to the oldest man present, Benjamin Franklin, and said: "Dr. Franklin, what have we got?" He replied, "Madam, we have a Republic, if we can keep it."

That is the question for us all: Can we keep our Republic? In this task, each and every American has a part. As Commander McCain said so eloquently, "One of the most important things in life is to make some contribution to your country."

Phyllis Schlafly is the co-author of three books on nuclear strategy, *The Gravediggers* (1964), *Strike From Space* (1965), and *The Betrayers* (1968), and has testified on national security before the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees. She is now a commentator on *Spectrum* for CBS radio and television. Her 1972 series of interviews with military and nuclear experts was aired on 70 television and 50 radio stations. Her first book was *A Choice Not An Echo* (1964), and her latest book is a biography entitled *Mindszenty the Man*.

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