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XXVI. American Nationals in Japanese Custody

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Relatives and friends of Americans held as prisoners of war by the Japanese military authorities have inquired of various agencies of the Government concerning the prospects for their early repatriation, suggesting in most cases that Japanese prisoners of war be offered in exchange for the Americans.

There are three distinct categories of American nationals in Japanese custody, namely:

(1) Prisoners of war, that is, members of the American armed forces who have been captured by the Japanese armed forces,

(2) Sanitary and religious personnel captured while serving with the armed forces, and

(3) Civilians in Japan or Japanese-occupied or controlled territory, the majority of whom have been interned.

There is no customarily accepted practice among nations nor provision of international law or conventions for the return or exchange during war of able-bodied members of the armed forces of one belligerent captured by the forces of the opposing belligerents. It is a major objective of warfare to deplete as rapidly as possible the forces of the enemy, and it has so far been deemed inexpedient for military reasons to propose the release and return of able-bodied prisoners of war. In the circumstances, there is no immediate

prospect of obtaining the release and return to the United States of able-bodied members of the American armed forces taken prisoners of war by the Japanese.

The only prisoners of war whose release and return to their own country is provided for and sanctioned by international agreement and practice are the seriously sick and seriously wounded who are no longer capable of contributing to the enemy war effort. The release and return of such prisoners is provided for in the Geneva Prisoners of War Convention of 1929, which both Japan and the United States are applying in this war. Steps are already under way for implementing the relevant provisions of that convention. Military operations and the difficulties of transportation through military zones are the principal obstacles at present in the way of such a movement.

Negotiations are also under way for the release and return of such captured sanitary and religious personnel as may not be needed to care for their compatriots who are prisoners of war.

Every endeavor is being made to obtain the release as quickly as possible of those eligible therefor, and all feasible steps are being taken to provide for the well-being of all our nationals of whatever category in enemy hands until such time as they can be offered an opportunity to return to their homes in the United States.