

Prisoners of War

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You are the leader of a country currently engaged in a war that began when a portion of your country ceded from the whole and sought to form its own country. This attempted new nation has one exceptionally noticeable difference from your own: they enslave people of color.

This bloody battle has been raging for several years. Prisoners of War camps have sprung up on both sides. In the East (the ceded portion), the deadliest prison camp is Johnsonville. The economy of the East has taken a severe hit as the war has progressed. The hyperinflation, lack of resources, and lack of transportation paired with Eastern resentment towards the West has caused Johnsonville Prison Camp to be an atrocity. You have been receiving trustworthy reports of the conditions of this among other camps throughout the war. The Johnsonville prison was built to hold a maximum of 10,000 prisoners- it currently holds approximately 35,000. The only source of water for drinking, bathing, cooking, and sewage is a creek that ran through the camp and formed a swamp. Food rations consist of a small portion of raw meat or corn. On average, 100 soldiers die each day. A few of the causes of death in the camp are as follows: Asphyxia (suffocation due to insufficient oxygen and excess carbon dioxide), Enteritis (the inflammation of intestines), and smallpox (characterized by fever, vomiting, and pustular skin eruptions). Approximately 15,000 soldiers have died in this prison camp to date.

A haphazard prison exchange has occurred throughout the war. Small numbers of prisoners have been traded over enemy lines by military officers from both the East and West. The self-proclaimed President of the East has just made you a proposal to enlarge this exchange between the warring nations. However, there is a catch: this proposed exchange would only extend to white soldiers. Soldiers of color would continue to be prisoners of war or be placed into slavery in the East.

You are torn. Your first instinct is to refuse the offer on the grounds that enslavement and discrimination against a particular demographic of people are horrendous acts. You feel that by beginning this formal exchange, you would be in some way condoning these acts. If your country loses this war, these prisoners of color will likely never be freed or allowed to return home. However, you also want to free as many of your soldiers as possible from the horrible prison camps of the East. You know that if you accept the President's offer, you will be alleviating the suffering of thousands.

Study Questions

Question 1: Should you accept the President's offer?

Question 2: How does the percent of imprisoned soldiers that are people of color affect your answer to question 1, if at all?

Question 3: Do you, as the President of a nation, have a greater obligation to do what is just or to do what saves the greatest number of lives possible?