

The gentlemen in the State Department are now beginning to understand that poignant feeling of tortured helplessness which pressed upon the families of kidnap victims when the critical moment came to enter into ransom negotiations with the criminals. A decade ago, before the kidnaping racket was broken up by the G-men, there was a hard-boiled school of thought which argued that if the police power effectively halted every move of the distressed family to pay ransom to recover the victim, kidnaping would become unprofitable and so cease.

It was a grim thesis which brushed aside the agony of the victim's parents or relatives. But it might have worked for the better good.

Now, when some Americans are held hostages in enemy terrain, there has developed in the State Department a quiet, vigorous opposition to the proposition that enemy spies and enemies convicted of crime against this nation should be turned over as ransom for the release of innocent U. S. nationals trapped by circumstance in enemy terrain.

Government bigwigs are privately blasting their colleagues in the Administration over the success of the Axis powers in getting their spies and agents on the safe conduct list in the present swap of diplomats. These critics are proclaiming that the United States



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has lost face on the international scene by allowing our enemies, through intermediary nations, "to sharp-trade us into granting diplomatic status to spies, thugs and perjurious agents."

At the moment, the row pivots over the case of Mario Lauro, former American citizen and Italian Fascist chief in New York city, who under diplomatic immunity was placed aboard the Drottningholm and



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transported safely back to Europe. Among Lauro's fellow passengers was Johanna Hoffman, 30-year-old former hairdresser, who was serving—until her State Department release—a four-year sentence for espionage.

The "no ransom for kidnapers" group in the State Department are charging that the case of Lauro was particularly flagrant. The facts are interesting.

Lauro was an American citizen. The dapper, 50-year-old self-proclaimed Fascist lived with his family in the Bronx and claimed to be a correspondent for the Italian newspaper Telegrapho, the property of Il Duce's son-in-law, Foreign Minister Ciano.

As an American citizen, Lauro, after Italy and the United States were formally at war, enjoyed all the immunities granted by his oath of allegiance to the U. S. Suddenly, in March, the U. S. State Department to its great surprise received from the Italian government through the Swiss intermediaries a request that American-citizen Lauro be given a ride home on the Drottningholm. The amazed State Department protested that the request was impossible because Lauro was neither an Italian nor a diplomat.

Promptly, Il Duce arrested two additional American citizens in Rome and then sent the retort back to our State Department through the Swiss, saying in effect:

"You are perfectly correct in saying that Lauro took the oath of allegiance to the United States. But that was simply because if he hadn't become an American citizen his position in America as chief of the Fascist associations would have placed him in grave danger."

The students of diplomatic tradition are now pointing out that this is the first war-time confession by one government to another that a subject took foreign citizenship to screen the acts of a hostile agent. The State Department decided to grant Italy's request—but only after first stripping Lauro of American citizenship. Later, they argued that Lauro had a trade value, that every

important Axis personage granted safe-conduct by this nation means that an equivalent number of Americans will be given reciprocal rights in enemy lands.

This defense has been met by the charge of critics that Lauro was branded as an enemy agent by Italy and that Johanna Hoffman was a convict. There are no American equivalents in spies, perjurers and convicts in enemy hands. The value of American lives in foreign nations, they insist, has now been cheapened by our willingness to submit to ransom extortions and above all by our yielding to Axis pressure exerted by arrests of Americans especially staged "to put on the heat."

The tedious, six-month-long negotiations leading to the exchange of diplomats between America and our enemies have broken all records for diplomatic delay since the era of horseback and stage-coach communications. This is the first war since the inauguration of diplomatic procedure back in 1815 that foreign correspondents have been blanketed wholesale under the protection of diplomatic immunity. And Lauro is believed to be the first wartime foreign agent ever put on the spot by his own country—and then shipped home by his country's enemy.