

## The Sontay Mission

It was a daring mission, all right, and not enough can be said in appreciation of the courage and the competence of the band of volunteers who plunged into the camp at Sontay in a futile effort to free an undetermined number of American prisoners of war. There can never be enough said, either, about the agony of the POW's and their relatives, for they live in a cruel limbo which touches the sensitivities of decent and responsible people everywhere. The problem rightly torments the Nixon administration, as it tormented the Johnson administration, so that the impulse to try to do something to relieve this agony is understandable. Contrary to a statement by Secretary Laird, the raid at Sontay may not even be the first attempt that failed. It is, however, the first attempt to turn a failure into an attribute, to argue that such a fiasco somehow demonstrates at last that the country cares about its prisoners, and to suggest that there is something unique about this administration's concern.

"Back in March of 1969, shortly after I became secretary of defense, this administration initiated a program of going public on the prisoner of war matter," Secretary Laird said in his Monday press conference and yesterday he argued before Congress that the Sontay mission "shows that the people in this country do care about the prisoners of war . . ."

Well, there are several things to be said about this, and the first is, of course, that the Nixon administration, has nothing—and perhaps somewhat less than nothing—to show for its display of concern. "If there had been prisoners in the compound at Sontay they would be free men today," Mr. Laird declares, but there were not even any prisoners in the compound on Nov. 20, by the administration's own acknowledgement, when the President gave his go-ahead for the raid. That being the quality of the intelligence upon which the President was acting, it is difficult to accept with any confidence the estimates of the administration about any other aspects of the operation. It was, by everyone's agreement, a high risk affair, to the credit of those who carried it out. But you have to ask yourself what sort of concern we are showing for our prisoners when we sweep them up in so chancy a mission, what sort of cure for dying in a prison camp you are offering, when you propose to involve enfeebled POW's in a shootout at close quarters and to pack them into helicopters and fly them out across enemy-occupied territory in the dark of night.

You have to wonder, then, not just what was

gained by failure, in terms of a show of concern, but what would have been gained if the prisoners had been there and had been successfully freed. Any man freed, it can be argued, is a plus. But a military operation must be measured in terms of risk and while we do not know how many might have been freed at the most, because the administration won't answer that question, we do know that the lot of the great majority that would still be in captivity would hardly be improved. And now of course, we must confront the almost certain prospect that the lot of all our POW's is going, if anything, to deteriorate; some are sick and all are doubtless weak and underfed; six, we are told, have died in recent weeks. The chances of reprisals aside, they will surely be moved around more frequently, subjected to stricter security, perhaps treated even more harshly than they have been.

So the administration can make such arguments as it wishes about the odds, and the risks, and the rightness of the chances taken. They will be judged, as they have judged others, on results. And the result of the Sontay affair does nothing for the prospects of liberating our captured men. It precludes, one would suppose, further rescue attempts. It can hardly enhance the prospects of a negotiated release, for what this says to Hanoi, less than two months after the President's much-touted offer to bargain for an exchange of prisoners, is that we have lost all faith in bargaining.

So what are we to make of it? It is easy to condemn the failure of a risky mission, or even to ask whether success would have justified the risk. For our part, it would not have. But in fairness, it seems to us quite conceivable that the prisoners and their wives, in their dreadful desperation, might well see it otherwise. There is some evidence of this, not only in the support of the attempt which has been voiced already by some prisoners' wives, but in the state of mind of the prisoners as it has been described to government officials by the handful who have been released. It is not easy to put yourself in the place of men of action now cruelly confined to an open-ended imprisonment and to know how they would weigh a risk which other men might find unacceptable.

In any case, the mission failed. And so we are back at square one, or worse, and there is no convincing way for the President or Secretary of Defense to justify their judgment or rationalize the results. By "going public on the prisoner of war matter" they have dramatized a terrible dilemma—and left it more than ever unresolved.