

U.S. Claims 'Net Plus' for Raid

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U.S. strategists are claiming a "net plus" for the commando raid on a North Vietnamese prison camp—a paradoxical score for an admittedly unsuccessful mission.

At least initially, the raid that failed has aroused enough sympathy for its prime objective to offset much of the sting of adverse world reaction to the heavy American bombing of North Vietnam last weekend. This adds up, American officials maintain, to a standoff for

the diplomatic-propaganda consequences of the double blow against North Vietnam.

The long-term consequences, however, are less clear. Although U.S. officials have avoided the subject in recent days, they have acknowledged in the past that Nixon administration strategy is following two different tacks: to convince the American public that the United States will not escalate the war in Indochina; to convince Hanoi that it may escalate the war.

In explaining U.S. actions

to congressional committees last week, Secretary of State William P. Rogers gave public assurance that the United States is not escalating the war. Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird was emphasizing the other side of the strategy—that it might escalate, if North Vietnam provided any provocation.

North Vietnam has chosen to believe what Laird is doing, rather than what Rogers is saying.

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Laird's public warning, on Nov. 13, that the United States will "take appropriate action in response to attacks on our unarmed aircraft" registered much more sharply in North Vietnam than it did in the United States.

North Vietnam immediately treated Laird's remark as public groundwork for an attack. Hanoi's leaders issued public instructions to all forces for greater "vigilance and combat readiness" to meet "new adventurous acts against the North . . ."

When the blows came, however, they penetrated deeper into North Vietnam than any have since the United States halted its sustained bombing of the North on Nov. 1, 1968. U.S. officials are now convinced that the commando raid at Sontay, just 23 miles from the capital city of Hanoi, caused great embarrassment and chagrin for North Vietnam's air defense strategists.

This is expected to result in tightened security control of U.S. prisoners, plus greater air defense.

The attempted prisoner-release has received considerable sympathy abroad, where Hanoi's past attempts to handle captured U.S. pilots as "war criminals" backfired on North Vietnam.

But a number of foreign observers, while praising the gallantry of the attempt, questioned its judgment. The Times of London, called the raid "a reminder of the worst failing peace—the fail-

ure to keep military and political policy in step . . .

"It would be gratifying," said The Times, "if the shock of the raid were to extract some future concessions from the North Vietnamese over prisoners. Much more probable is a hardening all around at the Paris peace talks and stronger suspicions in Hanoi over what American policy really is in winding down the war."

U.S. officials have noted, with great interest, that Hanoi's commentary on the prisoner camp raid, in a Foreign Ministry statement Friday, was, as they interpreted it, "defensive" on the prisoner issue.

Absent from the latest statement were any characterizations of the captured U.S. pilots as "war criminals," "bandits," "pirates" or "aggressors." Instead, Hanoi said: "The government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam has unswervingly carried out a humanitarian policy vis-a-vis the captured U.S. pilots. It has taken measures to ensure their safety. The U.S. threat to strike and take away pilots in detention camps shows how adventurous and hysteric the U.S. authorities are! . . . The U.S. aggressors must bear full responsibility for their reckless acts."

What the Hanoi statement focused on was not the prisoners, but the bombing of North Vietnam and U.S. attempts "to justify the widening of the zone of attacks" by adding, as the U.S. has

done, a new element: air strikes to protect American pilots on missions "to interdict North Vietnamese supplies" moving through Laos.

This shows, Hanoi maintained, that the United States is bent on new "adventurous acts" against North Vietnam, citing Laird's warnings last week that new action may be taken to free American pilots.

Yesterday, both major North Vietnamese daily newspapers, Nhan Dan and Quan Doi Nhan Dan, called for intensification of the nation's defenses "to make a strong bunker of every village, enterprise, farm, worksite, and street, and to turn our villages and mountains into deadly traps to annihilate the U.S. aggressors wherever they show up . . ."

This is further indication, U.S. experts concede, that a "siege mentality," which the latest raids have intensified, is spreading in North Vietnam. Hanoi's attitude, in turn, leaves wide open the question of whether, in the long run, the U.S. attacks will prove to be a "net plus" or a "net minus" for ending the war.