

Nixon makes a big hit with the Viet POWs

SAN CLEMENTE (UPI) — Former President Nixon held a fifth anniversary party for more than 250 former Vietnamese prisoners of war yesterday and was told by their highest-ranking officer that they owe him "eternal gratitude" for his part in securing their release.

The former POWs and their wives, girlfriends and a few children, totalling more than 500, gathered on the grounds and around the swimming pool of Nixon's La Pacifica estate at a Mexican-motif reception that began last night.

It was the first major social event Nixon has held since he resigned the presidency under threat of impeachment four years ago, and he could not have assembled a more sympathetic audience.

After the guests had been brought to San Clemente by bus from their fifth convention in Los Angeles, Nixon walked out into the courtyard and joked with many of them and then made a brief serious speech.

"One of the ironies of history is that today's heroes often are tomorrow's forgotten men," Nixon said. He added, however, that this particular group had left the United States a "legacy which will inspire Americans for years to come."

Nixon said one question they and other Americans must ask themselves is whether "it was all worth it," and he said the answer would be "yes" if men like the POWs could inspire all Americans with the will to resist "despotism and barbarism" in other parts of the world.

The United States is militarily and economically strong, Nixon said.

"But military and economic strength without the will to use that strength is the height of impotence," he said. "You have the will and the will in spades."

Responding for the POWs was Air Force Major Gen. John Flynn of Shalimar, Fla. Flynn said he and his comrades understood the "loneliness of your decision" to order a heavy bombing of North Vietnam in December of 1972.

A few months later a ceasefire was declared, and the prisoners were released.

"We owe you an eternal gratitude which it will be impossible for us to ever discharge," Flynn said. "We want to tell you, 'God bless you.'"

Pat Nixon, suffering from a viral infection, did not attend the party but was with her daughter Julie Eisenhower, who is expecting a child in several months.

Her role as hostess was taken by Tricia Nixon Cox, who was dressed in a white gown with a white flower in her blonde hair.

A spokesman for Nixon said the former president was picking up the tab for the food and beverages but that citizens of San Clemente had volunteered to act as hosts and conduct guided tours of the house itself.