

Longer version filed POWs

Merry-Go-Round

The POW Issue is Worrying Nixon

OCT 27 1971

SFChronicle



Jack Anderson

THE FAMILIES of some American war prisoners have accused the Nixon Administration of manipulating them for political purposes.

The charge is hotly disputed by most of the worried next-of-kin. But we have detected some evidence of backstage management.

President Nixon is fretting over the POW issue. As American forces withdraw from Vietnam and turn the fighting over to the South Vietnamese, he expects the anti-war fervor to die down in the U.S. But the continued presence of Americans in North Vietnamese prison camps could raise political havoc in 1972.

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THE PRESIDENT believes Hanoi is fully aware of the emotional impact of the POW issue on the American public and, therefore, will hold the prisoners hostage for a favorable political settlement.

Mr. Nixon has tried every possible approach to Hanoi to obtain their release. He has focused world opinion on the prisoner issue in an attempt to bring pressure upon Hanoi. But it is now evident to the President that the North Vietnamese intend to wring every possible concession out of the U.S. before turning the prisoners loose.

Last July, the North Vietnamese offered to release the prisoners concurrently as the Americans pulled out of Vietnam. But in return, they demanded a total

withdrawal of all U.S. troops and equipment in 1971.

Mr. Nixon is unwilling to leave the South Vietnamese without the weapons to defend themselves. He also intends to leave a residual force, probably less than 50,000 men, to help the South Vietnamese operate their equipment and to give them logistic support.

This has created a stand-off in the maneuvering over a settlement. The President thinks the presence of this force in Vietnam will give him a bargaining card that he can use to get the prisoners back. But the North Vietnamese insist the prisoners won't be returned as long as Americans remain in South Vietnam.

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THE DEFENSE Department has been instrumental behind the scenes in organizing some 2700 family members into the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. A Defense Department lawyer, Charles Havens, who had worked on the POW issue at the Pentagon, stepped into the non-paying job as counsel for the league shortly after leaving government.

Havens drew up a constitution which seeks to keep the league out of lobbying activities. He claims this is necessary for tax-exemption purposes. The idea, however, that the Internal Revenue Service would prosecute the wives of war heroes is ludicrous. More likely, the constitution is intended to discourage family members from agitating for the return of their men.