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Nixon and the Rescue Mission

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There is a single threat of concern that binds together every one of President Nixon's spectacular military ventures in Vietnam this year: his anxiety about the consequences of the American withdrawal.

Provided only that the risks appear limited in scope and time, the President has shown himself ready to try even the most unorthodox actions to defend himself militarily and politically against the uncertainty that withdrawal invites.

He moved into Cambodia to shore up the allied positions around Saigon. He temporarily resumed heavy bombing of North Vietnam in May and again last weekend to frustrate enemy build-ups and to demonstrate his punch for the days when his ground troops are gone. And he failed daringly last Friday in the raid to liberate some American prisoners—a mission undertaken so that no one could ever say he had been remiss in his obligations to those unfortunates.

In the first reactions here to that airborne landing, a number of officials and legislators wondered whether Mr. Nixon had not risked more men than he could ever have saved. Others said they needed only to imagine success—say a dozen prisoners dramatically airlifted home for Thanksgiving—to envision the promise that the operation must have suggested at the White House.

Attempt Its Own Reward

From the little that is known here about Mr. Nixon's anxiety on the prisoner issue, the attempt itself was its own reward, even in failure.

The President intensified the Government's anger in recent months as it became clear that Hanoi intended to use the American prisoners to extract political advantage in the bargaining over peace terms. He

was said months ago to have shown a keen feeling for the trapped men and their families.

He was also said to have feared that the issue of the prisoners would loom large among the postwar recriminations, when it would be charged that he had abandoned them along with other American interests in Southeast Asia.

What went wrong in the raid remained a mystery here. But Mr. Nixon's willingness to authorize even a desperation effort came as no surprise to the officials who had felt goad to take every possible diplomatic and propaganda action to win the prisoners' release.

The failure—though the Pentagon portrayed it as valorous—is bound to raise the most serious questions in the minds of the President and other officials. The intelligence data were at least as wrong as the information that caused him wrongly to announce the location and overrunning of the enemy's secret field headquarters in the Cambodian jungle last spring.

Was the raiding party misdirected? Was the operation compromised by a security leak? How much do we really know about the lives and treatment of the prisoners if we do not even know for sure where they are?

Some Unanswered Questions

The Government refused to say how many men served in the rescue party or how many they could have carried out. The risk of retaliation on the prisoners for casualties inflicted on North Vietnamese was duly weighed, according to the Secretary of Defense, Melvin R. Laird, but no one would discuss the risks in terms of the expected gains.

The Army colonel who led the raid said that the prisoners appeared to have been moved from the target installation several weeks ago. Yet the North Vietnamese, in a guarded reference to some fighting near Hanoi last weekend, said American prisoners had been injured. Did the raiders really

know where they were in the night?

Their leaders were forbidden to answer any of those questions.

Even the timing of the revelation was not satisfactorily explained. It was clearly related, at least in concept, to the air attacks on enemy supply points and depots throughout the southern parts of North Vietnam over the weekend. A similarly large raid, called "protective reaction" and retaliation for attacks on American reconnaissance planes, was staged in unison with the assault into Cambodia in May.

Yet the Administration had hoped to separate the two actions and to reveal the raid for prisoners as long as possible after the bombing raids, if ever. It did not want to leave the impression that the bombing was merely an elaborate diversion for the secret landing and it did not wish to give Hanoi an excuse for punishing the prisoners for this and future air attacks.

See also New Orleans States-Item 25 Nov 70.