

LAIRD REVEALS U.S. PLANNED TO KEEP CAMP RAID SECRET

But He Tells House Group of the Decision to Avoid a 'Credibility Problem'

By TAD SZULC

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 25 —

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that the Nixon Administration disclosed the commando raid last Friday on the empty prisoner-of-war camp in North Vietnam to avoid a "credibility problem" with the American public.

Testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Laird seemed to astonish the Congressmen with the statement that "It was not my plan to bring [the raid] to the public attention, necessarily."

Later, senior Administration officials said that the United States originally had no intention of announcing the raid at all because it had failed to free the prisoners who, unknown to American intelligence, had been moved from the camp near Hanoi to another compound several weeks earlier.

Medals Awarded

Mr. Nixon awarded medals for gallantry to four participants in the raid at a White House ceremony this afternoon.

Mr. Laird, in his testimony, said that the United States had been accused by North Vietnam of "what we did not do—sending waves of planes on Hanoi and Haiphong," and, therefore, "we have a certain problem of credibility in our society."

He said that he had recommended that "we go public" with the announcement on Monday because the Administration had "to explain what we did in the North."

Under persistent questioning by Representative John C. Cul-

Laird Tells Why Raid Was Disclosed

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American aircraft, carrying out retaliatory air strikes over the southern section of North Vietnam at the time of the commando raid had struck the capital area, the Nixon Administration decided Monday afternoon to tell the story.

North Vietnam, usually quick to charge the United States with aggressive acts, waited 48 hours more and only today informed its population of the landing at Sontay.

The air strikes were ordered, according to the Administration, to punish Hanoi for having violated a 1968 "understanding" under which the United States halted its bombings of North Vietnam in exchange for a series of unwritten commitments by Hanoi.

Specifically, the Administration charged that the "understanding" was violated through the shooting down on Nov. 13 of an unarmed American reconnaissance plane over North Vietnam and the recent shellings of the cities of Saigon and Hue in South Vietnam by the Communists.

Political Victory Seen

Although the commando raid failed to reach its specific objectives, the Nixon Administration appeared to have turned the Sontay expedition into something of a domestic political victory as its most outspoken Congressional critics vied with each other in praising the gallantry of the raiders even as they deplored the risks undertaken in the operation.

Thus, President Nixon today pinned the Distinguished Service Medal on Brig. Gen. Leroy J. Manor, of the Air Force, who planned the mission, and the Distinguished Service Cross on Col. Arthur D. Simons, of the Army, who led the raiding party.

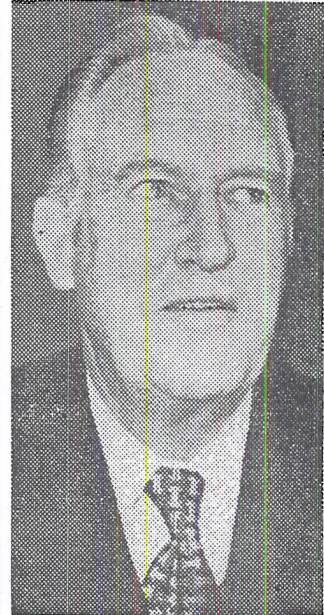
He awarded the Distinguished Service Cross to Specialist 1 Tyrone J. Adderly of the Army for "neutralizing" the enemy on the ground with grenade fire, and the Air Force Cross to T. Sgt. Leroy M. Wright, a helicopter crewman, who helped lay down covering fire during the party's departure despite a foot injury. Sergeant Wright was on crutches at the White House ceremony.

In making the awards, Mr. Nixon promised that the United States would do all it can "at the diplomatic table and in



Associated Press

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird at House hearing.



United Press International

Secretary of State William P. Rogers gives testimony.

other ways" to free the American prisoners.

He did not explain this remark, but Mr. Laird told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday that the Administration was considering "other action" through "unusual means" to obtain the prisoners' freedom.

Mr. Nixon described the raid as a "mission of mercy," and said that this was "a day that makes us very proud of the United States."

The Sontay expedition and the weekend air strikes over North Vietnam commanded continued attention of Congressional committees as Mr. Laird testified for the second day on these events and Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Under Secretary of State John Irwin 2d, and the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, U. Alexis Johnson, appeared at Congressional hearings.

Questioning Centers on Vietnam

Mr. Rogers and Mr. Laird appeared successively before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in open sessions to urge approval by Congress before the end of the current session next month of supplemental military and economic assistance funds to Asian and Middle Eastern nations totaling \$1.035-billion.

But much of the questioning of the two officials centered on the Vietnam events as Congressmen showed only passing interest in the supplemental re-

quest after receiving assurances that the \$255-million for Cambodia would not represent the beginning of a new military involvement for the United States.

Mr. Irwin and Mr. Johnson testified on the Vietnam events before a closed session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which yesterday heard Secretary Laird in an open and nationally televised meeting.

Sen. J. W. Fulbright, the committee chairman, said later that Mr. Irwin's testimony "was helpful as the testimony of a junior partner can be."

The Arkansas Democrat, who repeatedly charged yesterday that American Intelligence had failed in the Sontay raid, today also blocked temporarily a resolution submitted by Sen. Robert J. Dole, Kansas Republican, praising the "extraordinary courage, dedication and selflessness" of the commando volunteers.

Mr. Fulbright said he feared the resolution could be erroneously "interpreted as over all approval of policy." He said the Dole resolution was a "premature and thoughtless endorsement of a courageous act of valor."

At the House committee hearings, Secretary Rogers told the Congressmen that last week-end's events in North Vietnam "will have no effect one way or another" on the Paris peace talks.

He said that "the fact is that no progress has been made" in Paris and "it is as simple as that."