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## Mr. Laird's Credibility Gap

Disingenuous is a charitable word to describe Defense Secretary Laird's explanation of why he failed to tell the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Nov. 21 bombing of North Vietnam included air strikes in the Hanoi area. "I only answer the questions that are asked," he said.

A sharper characterization was employed by Senator Fulbright, when asked in a television interview if Mr. Laird had been "candid."

"They misrepresent the facts. Obviously he did, and they do it all the time," Mr. Fulbright said.

It was this comment that has impelled Mr. Laird to answer "innuendos that I had not been truthful." The Defense Secretary said that he had acknowledged at a closed hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee Nov. 24 that there had been about a dozen Shrike missiles fired against Communist anti-aircraft installations in connection with the abortive prisoner-of-war rescue attempt. But at the open hearings of the Foreign Relations Committee that same day, he said, "because perhaps members of the committee were not as prepared as they might be, the question was not asked."

The question had been put, however, at Mr. Laird's press conference the previous day. "Were there any instances where our forces in this search-and-rescue operation, or the diversionary forces, did any bombing at all or any strafing?" the Defense Secretary was asked. Mr. Laird's reply was evasive. He said there was "a very minimum of firing" directed at the guard tower and other facilities during the helicopter landing inside the prisoner-of-war compound. At another point, he said that the diversionary feints off the North Vietnamese coast by Navy planes involved such maneuvers as lighting flares, "but there was no ordnance involved as far as North Vietnam was concerned above the 19th Parallel."

Mr. Fulbright's comment that "they misrepresent the facts" seems beyond challenge.

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## U.N. Speaks Up on Prisoners

The United Nations has spoken up eloquently and decisively in behalf of more humane treatment for prisoners of war and for compliance with the Geneva Convention of 1949. Ambassador Charles W. Yost said that adoption of this resolution by the General Assembly Social Committee shows that the plight of American prisoners in Vietnam "weighs on the conscience of the world."

It does not weigh very heavily, however, on the sixteen member states that voted against the resolution or the thirty-four that abstained; these governments are turning their backs on human decency for obvious political reasons. Even many of the most eloquent apologists for the Hanoi regime have difficulty explaining its barbaric handling of the prisoner-of-war issue.

Hanoi ratified the Geneva Convention more than thirteen years ago but it persists in flouting nearly every obligation it undertook with that action. It ignores Article 109, which requires the return home of seriously wounded or seriously ill prisoners as well as repatriation or internment in a neutral country of able-bodied prisoners long in captivity.

It has failed even to identify prisoners, some of whom are believed to have been in detention for five years, or to permit a free exchange of mail and the regular inspection of prisons by the International Committee of the Red Cross, or any other humanitarian organization or a protecting government.

Hanoi's argument that these helpless humans are "war criminals" and thus not entitled to protection under the Convention is so nauseating that even the well-trained delegate of Byelorussia must have difficulty mouthing it at Turtle Bay.

The United Nations action, along with Secretary General Thant's latest plea, at least emphasizes that most of the civilized world recognizes that Hanoi is utterly failing to honor its humanitarian obligations.