

Daring Dick's Death-Defying Deed of Derring-Do

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We are swimming through murky international waters indeed when the President of the United States seems to find political advantage in announcing a ludicrous fuck-up on the part of his own minions which he just as easily could have kept to himself. The fuck-up to which I refer is the daring commando raid deep within North Vietnam for the purpose of rescuing American POWs, the commando raid which successfully managed to hold a camp within thirty miles of Hanoi just long enough to find out that there weren't any American POWs there to rescue.

Senator Fulbright, other Congressional critics, and the media have been proposing various theories to account for this bit of Marvel Comics action, which runs the gamut from diabolical internal plotting by the Pentagon to sheer Presidential stupidity.

But consider the less obvious question: why did Nixon see fit to announce this failed mission when he could probably have gotten away with keeping his mouth shut?

The President of the United States, through his mouthpiece, the Secretary of Defense, announces with great fanfare that for the first time in the long and checkered history of the Vietnam war American troops have actually set foot on the soil of North Vietnam. The ostensible purpose of this unprecedented action was to rescue a handful of American POWs because Intelligence (the same Intelligence that produced the misinformation on the location of the POWs) indicated that mistreated American POWs were dying in North Vietnamese prisons. Bull the head Laird then states that the mission was a stirring success, although no POWs were rescued.

Taking all this at face value, the Presidential insanity theory begins to look pretty good. Consider for a moment the consequences that would have resulted from the SUCCESSFUL completion of this bit of helter-skelter. A handful of American POWs are snatched away to safety from the midst of the Oriental Menace. This of course would make the North Vietnamese feel ever so much more friendly toward the hundreds of American POWs they still hold. Sure it would. This invasion of North Vietnam—and

after all by any reasonable definition it WAS an invasion—is hardly likely to improve the atmosphere at the Paris peace talks. The end result of the successful completion of the mission would have been worse treatment for the remaining American POWs, poisoning of the political atmosphere in Paris, possible re-escalation of the war, and an international bad odor stuck onto the United States.

Interestingly enough, these are exactly the same results that were produced by the FAILED commando raid. The conclusion is inescapable — Nixon couldn't have cared less whether or not a few POWs were actually rescued. The fact of the raid itself was what counted in his political calculus. That's why he chose to announce that the raid had taken place even though it made him look somewhat foolish.

What could Nixon possibly hope to gain by such a ploy?

To answer that, one must understand the true military situation in Vietnam. For openers, the NLF and the North Vietnamese have had the crap kicked out of them by superior American forces. In Vietnam, the United States has totally disproved the hoary shibboleth that you can't win a guerrilla war with airpower. Massive use of helicopters gave American troops a crushing advantage in mobility over the guerrilla forces of the enemy, thus completely reversing the classical situation wherein the guerrilla force moves at will through the countryside while the conventional force opposing it is tied to fixed logistical routes. The lavish, savage and ruthless use of air power devastated the enemy forces from above and at this stage of the game has made hash of his supply routes.

Now America is pulling out its troops, "Vietnamizing" the war, turning over operations step by step to the huge South Vietnamese army, which numbers about a million men.

That is, America is pulling out its GROUND troops. But current plans are for the United States to continue to supply air support to ARVN as long as such support is needed. When one realizes that air power was what turned the war around in the first place and en-

abled the American and ARVN forces to so devastate the forces of North Vietnam and the NLF to the point where ARVN will soon be able to handle the ground war alone, it becomes obvious that the Nixon Administration expects to keep massive American air power in Vietnam for a long, long time. In fact, for the duration of a war which could yet prove to be interminable.

The South Vietnamese army, with the aid of American air support, will be able to more than hold its own against the forces of North

Vietnam and the NLF when and if American ground troops are finally withdrawn. But without American air power, North Vietnam and the NLF will regain the upper hand. It is ludicrous to suggest, as the Nixon Administration has, that the

South Vietnamese will be able to take over the air war in the foreseeable future.

By now, Nixon has obviously given up on a negotiated end to the war. There really is little that is negotiable. North Vietnam and the NLF will not stop fighting as long as the present regime in Saigon rules the country, and the present regime will obviously not negotiate its own demise. The present scenario calls for the withdrawal of American ground troops before the 1972 elections and the prosecution of the war to eventual victory by the Army of Vietnam backed up by American air power. Nixon has cleverly managed to equate the total withdrawal of American ground troops with an end to American involvement in the war in the eyes of the American public. By 1972, he can triumphantly announce that he has "brought our boys home" while American planes continue to rule the skies over South Vietnam. Thus no negotiated peace is politically necessary.

The only flies in the ointment are the American POWs held by North Vietnam.

Hanoi has made it pretty clear that it understands Tricky Dick's little game quite well. North Vietnam will NEVER release the American prisoners without a negotiated end to the war favorable to their side. Why should they? As long as the North Vietnamese hold American prisoners, Nixon cannot declare that the American role in the war is over. As long as North

Vietnam holds the POWs, domestic political pressure will exist in the United States for a negotiated peace even if all the ground troops are pulled out. North Vietnam has made it abundantly clear that its price for release of the prisoners is the true total withdrawal of ALL American forces—land, sea, and air. The POWs are Hanoi's only effective defense against continued crushing American air power in Vietnam, and they are using this for all it is worth. The hope that North Vietnam will release the American POWs before ALL American involvement ends is idiotic. They have everything to lose by freeing the POWs, and nothing whatever to gain.

In light of this, the true purpose behind the commando raid becomes somewhat clearer. Nixon is serving notice on North Vietnam that he will seriously consider freeing the POWs by force, not for humanitarian reasons but so that he can continue to use American air power in Vietnam indefinitely, even after the ground troops are withdrawn, without serious domestic repercussions.

This has the smell of bluff to it. To free all the POWs in North Vietnam would require something very close to a full-scale invasion. On the other hand, the Nixon Administration has displayed a great deal of irrationality on the POW question. Because the Nixon strategy requires the freeing of these POWs before the end of the war, the Administration has spoken and acted as if this were actually a live possibility—which it is not. Perhaps Nixon has psyched himself into believing that North Vietnam will be cowed into releasing the POWs by such an implicit threat, something which is totally in the realm of a wet dream.

There remains the ominous possibility that Nixon is NOT bluffing, that he really WOULD send American ground forces into North Vietnam, provided that American public opinion could be molded to accept such a move. Not to win the war, but to "rescue our boys." If this is the case, then the cynical callousness of the strategy is truly revolting, even for the team that gave us Spiro Agnew and John Mitchell. The American commando raid provokes North Vietnam to atrocities against American POWs

—or provides a credible excuse for Nixon & Co. to claim that such atrocities are being carried out. Another bigger commando raid. More real or propaganda atrocities. More raids. More atrocities. Until all the American POWs have either been rescued or killed. Notice that from Nixon's point of view, it doesn't matter whether the American POWs are killed or rescued: once Hanoi no longer holds American prisoners, he is free to use American air power in South Vietnam indefinitely and with impunity.

Of course I'm not really suggesting that a President of the United States would actually consider employing such a cynical piece of treachery and deceit. But it is possible for a President to become trapped by the logic of his own bluff.

Tonkin Gulf, anyone?