

# Tactics Disputed in Fight to Win Release

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WASHINGTON, June 6—For

two years, the Nixon Administration has been running a campaign of publicity and persuasion to marshal American and world opinion behind it on the issue of American prisoners of war in Indochina.

Administration officials interviewed recently said that they believed they had succeeded. They said that they had neutralized the issue in domestic politics, had pressed Hanoi into improving the lot of the prisoners and had turned the matter into a "diplomatic plus" in negotiations with the North Vietnamese.

But there are signs of disenchantment with President Nixon's insistence that Hanoi release the prisoners before he sets a date for withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam.

While many families of the prisoners support the President, some are now asking him to set a date for complete withdrawal in the hope that Hanoi would then return the men.

## Nixon's Firm Stand

The prisoner issue has also been taken up by antiwar critics, especially in Congress, who have used it in support of demands that the President set a withdrawal date.

The President, so far, has stood firm. At his news conference last Tuesday, he again rejected the setting of a pullout date, saying: "We have yet no indication whatever that they [the North Vietnamese] would be willing to release prisoners in the event we took certain steps."

Hanoi has said only that it will "discuss" the prisoners after the President has set a withdrawal date, although there have been unofficial hints that it would start releasing the men immediately after such a date was announced.

Some officials who had hoped that Hanoi might do so were discouraged late last week when the North Vietnamese declined to receive 13 wounded prisoners held by South Vietnam. They viewed the refusal to accept the prisoners as a signal that Hanoi was taking a harder line.

The United States, which had prompted the South Vietnamese offer to return the men, repeated the proposal. "Our offer to repatriate the prisoners who want to go still stands," said Ronald L. Ziegler, the President's press secretary.

President Nixon has contended that setting a firm withdrawal date would deprive the United States of a major bargaining point with the North Vietnamese and might endanger American troops because tactical plans would be revealed.

The refusal to name a date has also had the effect of giving the Saigon Government time to improve the quality of its army and to increase politi-



Mrs. Cora Weis, involved in the Women's Strike for Peace, views set troop withdrawal date as being essential for the release of prisoners from North Vietnam.



Associated Press

Mrs. Joan Vinson of the National League of Families of American Prisoners Missing in Southeast Asia, calls for a set withdrawal date of troops.

cal stability under the Vietnamization policy.

In defense of the President's refusal to set a date for withdrawal, White House officials pointed to a recent opinion research poll showing that, while 68 per cent of those questioned wanted a withdrawal by the end of 1971, 75 per cent opposed a disengagement "that threatens the lives or safety of American prisoners of war." The poll is believed to have been commissioned by the White House.

The Defense Department's latest composite report lists 1,630 men as missing in action in Southeast Asia, of whom 460 are believed to have been captured. The rest are unaccounted for. Hanoi has admitted to holding 339 men, but the Vietcong, the Pathet Lao and the Cambodian Communists have released no information.

The Administration's decision two years ago to "go public" on the prisoner issue was a reversal of the Johnson Administration's policy of silence.

Those familiar with the decision said that the intent was to put pressure on Hanoi to treat the prisoners better. They said that the opening up of mail channels in early 1970 was evidence of success.

Later, the Administration began using the prisoner issue as a diplomatic weapon. The President has justified plans for retaining a residual force in South Vietnam and for keeping open his options to bomb North Vietnam by pointing to Hanoi's unwillingness to return the prisoners.

The Administration has been left open to charges that it is using the prisoners as "pawns," an accusation that some antiwar militants have made.

To publicize the fate of the captives, the Administration has also:

Encouraged one of the few

returned prisoners, Lieut. Robert Frishman of the Navy, to denounce Hanoi for alleged brutalities. Returned prisoners had previously been told to keep quiet for fear of making things worse for those left behind.

Sent Frank Borman, the astronaut, around the world to consult with governments and to report to the Congress on the lack of progress in obtaining the return of the men.

Ordered the abortive raid on Sontay in North Vietnam in an attempt to rescue men thought held there. One wife of a prisoner said afterward: "After all these agonizing years, somebody was finally doing something."

Organized public relations efforts such as the tribute to the prisoners at the Army-Navy game last fall. An escaped prisoner also threw out the first ball to open the professional baseball season this spring.

Persuaded the Advertising Council, a nonprofit association, to put on a large advertising program to increase public awareness of the prisoners' plight.

Urged the wives and relatives of the captives to speak out on behalf of their men and encouraged local organizations to take up the prisoner issue as their cause.

## Organization Is Active

The most active organization is the National League of Families of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, which has officers in the American Legion headquarters here.

The league, which says it has about 2,100 members, is in constant touch with Henry A. Kissinger, the President's assistant for national security affairs, and other officials.

The league officially opposes any deal with Hanoi that does

not assure the release of the men and an accounting of those listed as missing.

Mrs. Joan Vinson, the league's president, said: "I would like to see the President say that he is prepared to announce a withdrawal date if the other side is prepared to announce that they will release all prisoners and account for those missing prior to or in conjunction with a withdrawal itself."

## 'Political Hostages'

Another but smaller group of families, calling itself POW/MIA Families for Immediate Release, indicated last week that it was moving toward asking the Administration to set a withdrawal date first in an effort to obtain the return of their men.

Mrs. Harold Kushner, wife of a captured Army doctor, said that the President's plan for a residual force "gives no hope for the release of our men." She asserted that "it creates a situation in which the prisoners have become political hostages."

Among the responses the Administration's campaign has generated was an announcement by the Air Line Pilots Association that prisoners who are fliers would receive preferential treatment in bringing the prisoners back.

Like other antiwar critics, she argued that only by setting a date for withdrawal can Hanoi be persuaded to release the prisoners. "The Geneva Convention," she said, "calls for the



## of P.O.W.'s

ential treatment after their return if they want to become commercial airline pilots with Eastern Airlines. Frank Borman, who is now an Eastern vice-president, approved the plan.

Among the dozens and perhaps hundreds of local organizations that have taken up the prisoner issue are the Heartland Youth for Decency, of La Mesa, California, which is collecting signatures for a petition to Congress to be delivered shortly, and the Forgotten Americans Committee of Kansas, which sent a delegation to Paris several months ago.

A number of antiwar groups have opposed the Administration's efforts. The most notable has been the Committee for Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam. It has been the major channel for mail to and from the prisoners.

The committee is led by Mrs. Cora Weiss, a New York activist in Women Strike for Peace. She recently told a Congressional committee: "No amount of pressure, no amount of petitions, no amount of holiday packages, no amount of speeches at the U.N., no amount of radio spots, of ads, of letter campaigns, of money, or of threats to mine Haiphong harbor can exchange of prisoners at the conclusion of hostilities, not before."



**TRIBUTE TO POW'S:** As part of effort to make public aware of U.S. prisoners, M.Sgt. Daniel Pitzer, who escaped from North Vietnam, opened this year's baseball season. With him, at left, is Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird. Similar tributes have been held.