

POW issue ^{27 Oct 71} worries President who gives wives VIP care

WASHINGTON— The families of some American war prisoners have accused the Nixon Administration of manipulating them for political purposes.

The charge is hotly disputed by most of the worried next-of-kin. But we have detect-

Jack Anderson

ed some evidence of backstage management.

In the privacy of his oval office, President Nixon is fretting over the POW issue. As American forces withdraw from Vietnam and turn the fighting over to the South Vietnamese, he expects the anti-war fervor to die down in the U.S. But the continued presence of Americans in North Vietnamese prison camps could raise political havoc in 1972.

The President believes Hanoi is fully aware of the emotional impact of the POW issue on the American public and, therefore, will hold the prisoners hostage for a favorable political settlement.

He has tried every possible approach to Hanoi to obtain their release. He has focused world opinion on the prisoner issue in an attempt to bring pressure upon Hanoi. But it is now evident to the President that the North Vietnamese intend to wring every possible concession out of the U.S. before turning the prisoners loose.

Last July, the North Vietnamese offered to release the prisoners concurrently as the Americans pulled out of Vietnam. But in return, they demanded a total withdrawal of all U.S. troops and equipment in 1971.

Nixon is unwilling to leave the South Vietnamese without the weapons to defend themselves. He also intends to leave a residual force, probably less than 50,000 men, to help the South Vietnamese operate their equipment and to give them logistic support.

Prisoner dilemma

This has created a stand-off in the maneuvering over a settlement. The President thinks the presence of this force in Vietnam will give him a bargaining card that he can

use to get the prisoners back. But the North Vietnamese insist the prisoners won't be returned as long as Americans remain in South Vietnam.

At a secret strategy session, the President told Republican congressional leaders fiercely: "We are going to end the Vietnam War. We are going to end it in such a way as to get the POWs out. I am not going to have to crawl to get them out. I am too grown up to crawl."

Meanwhile, Nixon desperately wants to hush the issue at home. Any flareup of emotions, he feels, would play into Hanoi's hands. He has sought, therefore, to placate the prisoners' families and to keep them quiet.

Behind the scenes

The Defense Department has been instrumental behind the scenes in organizing some 2,700 family members into the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. A Defense Department lawyer, Charles Havens, who had worked on the POW issue at the Pentagon, stepped into the non-paying job as counsel for the league shortly after leaving government.

Havens drew up a constitution which seeks to keep the league out of lobbying activities. He claims this is necessary for tax-exemption purposes. The idea, however, that the Internal Revenue Service would prosecute the wives of war heroes is ludicrous. More likely, the constitution is intended to discourage family members from agitating for the return of their men.

The league's advisory board was also selected with the active, if informal, advice of military officers. Most of the advisers are outspoken hawks on the war; some are retired military officers. No outspoken doves are active on the board.

Nixon and wives

President Nixon has been most solicitous toward the POW families. He has directed his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, to give them private briefings on the peace prospects. Some wives were invited to

a White House prayer meeting, others to watch an Army-Navy football game with the President. In return, here's how he has tried gently to manipulate them:

When he needed justification of his abortive raid on Son Tay to free prisoners, he called in the league's charming coordinator, Joan Vinson, and other POW wives to stand by him.

After some league wives conferred with Pathet Lao and Chinese Communist officials, the State Department tried to discourage them from presenting the Communist views to the press.

There's suspicion that the Nixon Administration had a hand in fashioning the proposals that were voted on at the league's recent convention. The wording, worked out by Havens, appeared calculated to block the militant minority from making the league more activist. Those who favored a more militant role would have had to vote to dissolve the league. The convention also swarmed with dashing officers, sent over from the Pentagon, who assisted the wives and, in some cases, berated wives who opposed Nixon's Vietnam policies.

League is divided

The issue has divided the league perhaps irrevocably. At the convention, the bitterness between the opposing factions was so thick you could cut it with a bayonet.

Joan Vinson, who helped to found the league, tried to steer a middle course between the extremes. But she has now been pushed aside by the league's conservative leadership.

The conservative wives, meanwhile, insisted to us that they have not been "used" by the administration but merely assisted in kindly fashion.