

# POW Plight Agonizes Nixon

WASHINGTON—One sure thing you know after you've been in this town as government official and newspaperman: no President, of any party, is going to tell the public the whole truth about what makes him lie awake nights.

Richard M. Nixon came very close to it in his CBS television interview with Dan Rather when he sort of agonized in public about his inability to get U.S. prisoners of war returned.

MR. NIXON'S more rabid critics are calling him a liar for saying that North Vietnam has made it clear that it will not release U.S. POWs in exchange for the mere setting of a date of total U.S. withdrawal. As much as I would like to see the President call the Communists' public bluff, those intimately involved in the secret diplomacy say the President is leveling with the public on this point.

They say Hanoi insists that before the POWs are released the United States must agree to a new government in Saigon that meets the total approval of the Communists. Mr. Nixon has decided on a total U.S. military withdrawal which will leave the grave risk of an early Communist military takeover, but he refuses steadfastly to become party to the ouster of the current Saigon regime and its replacement with a pro-Communist clique.

So President Nixon has confided to intimates that he just doesn't know how to get

back U.S. airmen imprisoned by the Communists. He has pretty much figured out how to get out of Vietnam under circumstances that will not look, immediately, like a capitulation to communism.

But he hasn't the foggiest idea what to do about Laos and Cambodia. If the Communists would agree to an international conference, the whole of Indochina could be wrapped up in a neat package, the U.S. could get out, and almost everyone would say good riddance.

But the Communists say no to every proposal for a conference.

This wouldn't be so terrible if those violently controversial incursions into Cambodia in April 1970 had dealt the Communists the near-fatal blows the Administration pretended they'd be at the time. But the reality now is that it will be a long way down the road before the Cambodian military can effectively erase the threat of a Communist military takeover.

And Laos? Almost 11 years ago President John F. Kennedy concluded that Laos was the wrong place and the wrong time for the U.S. to make a military stand against world communism. U.S. intervention would be 100 times less logical today.

LAOS HAS NO semblance of unity or order; it suffers widespread killing that never ends; it has no economy; its war, internecine and otherwise, crescendoes with one season and subsides with another, but Laos is never long in either position.