

POWs Caught in Swirl of U.S. Politics

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The American prisoners in North Vietnam are now political hostages to a greater degree than at any time in the Indochina war.

These POWs (425 men by the Pentagon's latest count) are caught in a swirl of politics that extends from the White House, to the McGovern camp, North Vietnam's politburo, to President Thieu's palace, to the Teamsters headquarters, to individual election campaigns all over the United States and presumably to dark cells in North Vietnam.

One of the many sub-tiers under this political superstructure are the feuding organizations representing the families of the imprisoned men. For example, some relatives complain that the alliance between Hanoi and the Committee of Liaison is forcing families to deal with that antiwar group headed by David Dellinger and Cora Weiss.

"If you want to get mail through," complained one relative, "you have to deal with Cora."

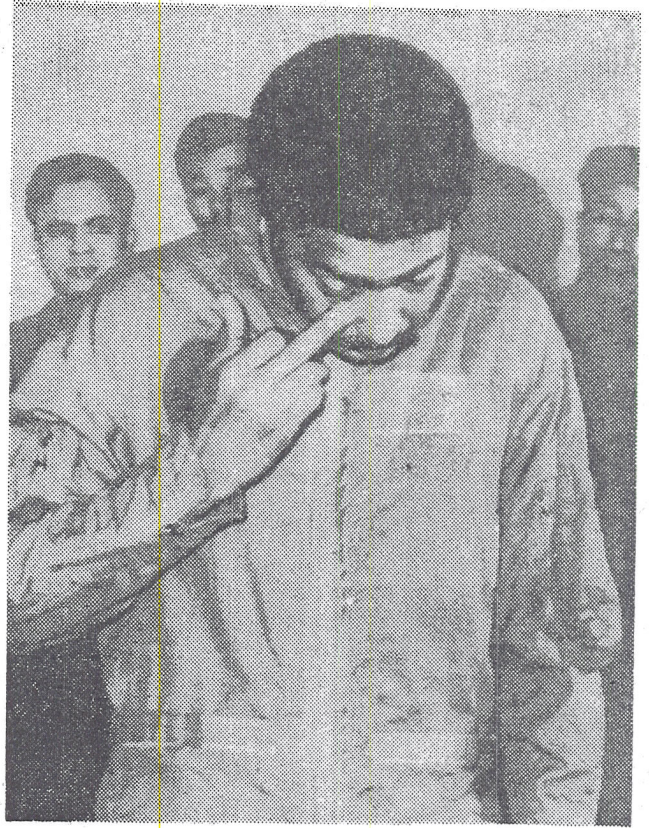
But like it or not—and

Nixon administration officials interviewed made it clear they do not like it — Hanoi's fresh promise to release three American prisoners to the Committee of Liaison is giving that antiwar group added stature. Mr. Nixon has been unable to offset it because he has not obtained release of POWs on his own for the past three years.

The last time Hanoi released any prisoners was on Aug. 5, 1969, when Navy Lt. Robert F. Frishman, 31; Navy Seaman Douglas B. Hegadahl, 25 (now a civilian), and Air Force Capt. Wesley L. Rumble, 49, were released.

In a switch of policy from the Johnson years when the POW issue was kept submerged in the government bureaucracy in hopes quiet diplomacy would achieve release of the men, the Nixon administration went public and allowed, if not encouraged, Frishman to speak out against his former captives

See POWs, A2, Col. 1



By Nippon Denpa News

This picture of Lt. (jg) Norris A. Charles was taken in the International Club in Hanoi on Dec. 20, 1971.



A relative of Navy Lt. (j.g.) Markham Gartley identified him as prisoner at left in photo taken two years ago.

in North Vietnam once he was freed.

Critics charged that letting Frishman lambast Hanoi's treatment of prisoners would lock the cell doors for good on the American captives he left behind. Today, even some of the State Department officials who helped arrange Frishman's gloves-off press conference declare his anti-Hanoi rhetoric has become too hot for diplomatic comfort.

At the Pentagon, information officials said in interviews last week that Frishman was going to speak out whether they wanted him to or not. So, they argued, it is unfair to accuse them of putting Frishman up to it. Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, however, has had no reluctance to declare a deliberate policy change on POWs.

"In March of 1969," Laird told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Nov. 24, 1970, "a conscious decision was made by me to recommend to the President and to this administration that we go forward and make the whole question of prisoners of war held by North Vietnam a public matter, and that we discuss it openly here in the United States.

"It had not been discussed extensively in the United States prior to that time. It had not been discussed by our diplomats, our ambassadors and others on a basis in which we tried to bring world opinion to bear on the North Vietnamese.

"... I believe that this effort will help us throughout the world in calling to the attention of every nation the importance that we attach to human life and to the return of these prisoners of war," Laird said.

Beyond going public on the plight of POWs in hopes of embarrassing Hanoi to treat them better if not release them, President Nixon himself has cited POWs to justify his war policies, shifting the emphasis to them from the dwindling number of American ground troops in South Vietnam.

On May 15, 1972—as American forces pitched in to help the South Vietnamese blunt Hanoi's Easter offensive—the President linked POWs to his decisions to bomb and mine North Vietnam.

"These actions I have ordered," said Mr. Nixon of the mining and bombing, "will cease when the following conditions are met: First, all American prisoners of war must be returned. Second, there must be an internationally supervised cease-fire throughout Indochina..."

McGovern, as part of the escalating debate on POWs in the presidential campaign, has charged that "the Nixon administration has missed no opportunity to parade its concern over American prisoners of war... but, at the same time, since Mr. Nixon took office, an average of one American every three days has been shot out of the sky. The escalated air war means that more and more Americans will be shot

American Prisoners of War

	Missing	Captured	Total
North Vietnam	455	425	880
South Vietnam	495	106	601
Laos	291	6	297
Totals	1,241	537	1,778

The resumption of full-scale bombing of the North this year in response to Hanoi's Easter offensive raised the number of Americans listed as captured in North Vietnam from 378 to 425 between Dec. 4, 1971, and Sept. 2, 1972. The number of missing in North Vietnam climbed from 407 to 455 men in the same period.

The following figures show the trend of American missing and captured in North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Laos, by year:

	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972*
Missing	4	54	201	226	294	176	86	79	118*
Capt'd	3	74	97	179	95	13	12	11	53*
Totals	7	128	301	405	389	189	98	90	171

*As of Sept. 2, 1972

Source: Defense Department

down and locked away. And none of them will be returned." McGovern contends that the way to get the POWs back is to stop the war, not make more POWs by sending more American pilots over North Vietnam.

In contrast to their stoic silence of the Johnson years, POW wives are taking sides in this political argument.)

Spokesmen for the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia recommended blockading North Vietnam long before President Nixon ordered the ports mined. Said Evelyn Grubb of the league in testifying before a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on March 23, 1971: "Let our government show the world that it can take positive action for a humanitarian cause. As long as men are dying, as long as prisoners are stranded in Southeast Asia, aid and trade with the enemy is absolutely wrong."

After President Nixon ordered North Vietnamese harbors mined, some POW wives endorsed the action publicly. After meeting with Mr. Nixon on May 15, 1972, Mrs. Paul E. Galenti of Richmond, Va., wife of an imprisoned Navy lieutenant commander, said, "The President put it very well when he said at least we now have some leverage to get the prisoners released. Before we had none."

Also, Mrs. James B. Stockdale of Coronado, Calif., whose Navy captain husband has been imprisoned since 1965, said after that same meeting that she endorsed "what President Nixon has done and is doing. He has my vote." She founded the National League of Families organization.

In a contrary view, POW wife Valerie Kushner of the POW-MIA Families has accused the Nixon administration of "using the prisoner issue to buy time for the South Vietnamese government." She added bitterly at a May 28, 1971, press conference called by her organiza-

"We've been fair game for everyone—not just the President, not just the right, not just the left. All kinds of people have been trying to justify their causes in the name of the POW

families." Mrs. Kushner seconded McGovern's presidential nomination at the Democratic National Convention.

The rightness or wrongness of war policies aside, the reality is that going public on the POW issue has reaped a political whirlwind that are now leaving apart earlier predictions that Vietnam would not be a big issue in this year's presidential campaign.

It is emotionalism, not numbers of victims, which fans the debate. The Pentagon list of 425 Americans captured in North Vietnam (another 455 are listed as missing) compares with the 2.5 million servicemen sent to Vietnam, the 45,856 who have been killed in battle and the 10,265 who have died there from accidents or diseases. Also, most of the American POWs in Vietnam volunteered for military service as distinguished from the thousands of draftees who were ordered into the war.

Some Attacks Distorted

The emotionalism of late has manifested itself in bitter—and sometimes distorted—attacks on Americans who go to North Vietnam to tackle the POW issue. Recent attacks on former Democratic Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who met with a Hanoi-selected group of POWs last month, are cases in point.

John Mitchell, Mr. Nixon's former Attorney General, said on Aug. 15 that Clark "has been led down the primrose path by a Communist newspaperman" by quoting the editorial's view that American POWs would be released the day McGovern was inaugurated. Mitchell called Clark's behavior "inexcusable."

In another attack on Clark, syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak on Friday put the words of the Communist editor into Clark's own mouth. This is that passage from the Evans-Novak column:

If McGovern were elected," Clark told the POWs, "the war would end on the day he came into office... There can be no question that the prisoners would be returned immediately."

What Clark actually said, as recorded on the tape of his meeting with the POWs, was the following:

"The editor of the biggest paper I was talking with this morning, he said — looked me right in the eye, and I can't question him, there is no reason for him to say it — that he's convinced that if McGovern were elected, and I don't mean this in a political way, this is just what the guy said, that the war would end the day he came into office and that there can be absolutely no question that the prisoners would be returned immediately. And he said he's not talking about three months."

The same Evans-Novak column alleged that Clark had told the POWs that columnist Jack Anderson had reported the health problems of Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton (D-Mo.) "based on 'a plant from FBI files.'"

Actually, Clark told the POWs, "I think Jack Ander-

son, the columnist, had it first. Whether it was a plant from FBI files or something, I don't know."

Attacks Affected

Despite the highly charged political atmosphere now surrounding the POW issue, such attacks cannot as comfortably be made by Nixon administration officials on such antiwar spokesmen as Mrs. Weiss and Dellinger of the Committee of Liaison. Again, the deterrent is the emotionalism the Nixon administration has generated worldwide. Since the release of the POWs has been made all-important, no Nixon administration official can profitably attack people making visible and dramatic progress toward that goal.

Hanoi apparently appreciated this dilemma of the Nixon administration and is increasing its efforts to exploit it between now and election day. Besides announcing that the North Vietnamese government would release three POWs to the Weiss-Dellinger group, Hanoi has been broadening its contacts with another administration critic and McGovern supporter, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.).

If James Hoffa, former head of the Teamsters union which has endorsed President Nixon for re-election, had been able to make some progress on the POW impasse in Hanoi, perhaps that would have taken some of the sting out of the Weiss-Dellinger success. But, at the last minute, the State Department last week refused to clear the way for Hoffa's planned trip to Hanoi.

The Weiss-Dellinger Committee of Liaison, headquartered in New York, has said the U.S. government must keep entirely clear of the POW release expected "within weeks." The Committee of Liaison's expressed position on POWs follows the McGovern rather than the Nixon stand: "The resolution of the fate of all the servicemen now held in North Vietnam waits ultimately upon a U.S. decision to end the war and withdraw all its forces according to the committee.

Treatment Angle

Hanoi's carefully orchestrated release could become discordant if the three prisoners they have selected follow Frishman's course once they are free and disavow previous statements by accusing North Vietnam of mistreating prisoners. There is circumstantial evidence that Hanoi has taken precautions against this happening:

- The three prisoners selected for release look well fed and this could not project a picture of torture in captivity.

- Two of them have made antiwar statements and the mother of the third has publicly demanded that President Nixon stop bombing North Vietnam.

- Two of the three men have not been in North Vietnam to see much of other prisons and prisoners and thus could testify only of their own perhaps favorable treatment.

Three Are Named

Hanoi said the men to be released are Navy Lt. (j.g.) Norris A. Charles, 27, of San Diego, a black radio intercept officer who was downed on Dec. 30, 1971; Air Force Maj. Edward K. Elias, 34, of Valdosta, Ga., who was an RF-4 pilot captured April 20, 1972; and Navy Lt. (j.g.) Markham L. Gartley, 28, of Dunedin, Fla., who has been imprisoned since Aug. 17, 1968.

Charles was one of the 10 POWs Ramsey Clark interviewed in Hanoi last month. In that interview, Charles said, "Thus far my treatment has been very humane and the Vietnamese have been very generous."

Elias has been identified as one of the American POWs who has made propaganda broadcasts for Hanoi, although no one yet knows to what extent his captors pressured him to do so.

Gartley's mother, Mrs. Gerald Gartley of Green-

ville, Maine, testified with Mrs. Weiss before the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee last year. After hearing about her son's impending release, Mrs. Gartley on Tuesday told reporters that President Nixon should "make a gesture of goodwill by halting the bombing while the release is in progress."

In cautioning against giving Hanoi too much credit for releasing those three POWs, government officials and relatives of imprisoned men make these points:

- The release of only three POWs takes the spotlight off the more than 400 other imprisoned men whom Hanoi will not let visitors see nor extend proper treatment to under the Geneva Convention, such as full identification and mail privileges.

- The three men selected for release may have indeed been treated well just so Hanoi could use them for propaganda. One man interviewed said his brother imprisoned in North Vietnam, has slipped clues into his letters revealing torture.

- The U.S. raid on the Sontay prison camp in North Vietnam was conducted, according to a former Pentagon official in on the planning, because reliable reports had asserted that Hanoi has sent 77 emaciated Americans there to die. They were removed before the raid took place.

- Some families receive mail regularly from POWs and others do not, suggesting that the North Vietnamese are putting the same kind of rewards and penalties pressures on prisoners that the Pueblo crewmen experienced while imprisoned for 11 months in North Korea.

(Torture was parceled out so systematically, according to Pueblo crewmen, that guards went from room to room with slips of papers telling them just how much to beat the various prisoners to make them crack. Anti-American press conferences, phony films of prisoners eating big meals or playing basketball were all part of the propaganda game the Pueblo crewmen said they were forced to engage in while locked up in North Korea.)

One advantage the POWs in North Vietnam will have over the Pueblo crewmen if they are freed is the unannounced policy decision of the Nixon administration to ignore any propaganda

statements they made in captivity. They will not be publicly humiliated, as were the Pueblo crewmen by the Naval Court of Inquiry, by being asked why they could not live up to the Code of Conduct.

In fact, interviews with Nixon administration officials disclosed that the foundation has been laid for scrapping or at least modifying the Code of Conduct for fighting men once all the POWs are freed. The code has no legal standing but

imposes an obligation on the captives to say very little while imprisoned—an obligation that Lt. Frederick C. Schumacher, operations officer of the Pueblo, found so burdensome under torture that he twice attempted suicide in North Korea.

Officially, however, the code still stands in the belief that it would be unfair to change it now because perhaps many POWs in North Vietnam have gone through hell trying to live up to it.
