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Bob Considine 24 Sept 72

The Propaganda Value of POWs

The Pentagon has mixed emotions about the three American POWs Hanoi turned over to the pacifist representatives of the Committee of Liaison With Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam.

"We have a responsibility toward them, as U.S. officers, and they have a responsibility toward this country's military," a spokesman said.

"We want to offer them medical treatment if needed," he added. "The last three Hanoi released arrived in New York in bad shape. One man had to be taken on the plane by stretcher. All three were flown to Bethesda Naval Hospital in a med-evac plane.

"Also, we'll want to give them intelligence debriefings, to learn more about the condition of the POWs still being held. We'll want to see that they are issued new uniforms, paid, and given the right to rejoin their families with some privacy."

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BUT NOT EVERYBODY concerned with the POWs believes that the military will have as much influence over the newest three as it had over the other nine men released by the enemy. One Pentagon official was particularly pessimistic.

"The Hanoi military people have told reporters that the men are perfectly free to leave, but Mrs. (Cora) Weiss (co-chairman of the liaison committee) has been quoted as saying that the men and their relatives who were flown to Hanoi at committee expense will leave only when she leaves and on the same Russian Aeroflot plane.

"We question whether she'll bring them directly to the U.S. The committee has put other POWs on display in propaganda capitals en route home: Moscow, the Soviet Bloc countries, Scandinavia and so forth — as foils and stooges for the committee's stand on the war.

"This is terribly tough on the families of the other men being held. It says to those families, in effect, that their men must act just like that if they ever expect to be released."

So far, the most outspoken of the three newly liberated men has been Lt. (j.g.) Norris A. Charles, a black pilot shot down four months ago over North Vietnam.

"I HOPE I HAVE made it clear that I am a McGovern man," Charles told Peter Arnett of the AP. "I feel that only by ending this war will all prisoners come home." The pilot added that he will volunteer to work for McGovern, once home and out of uniform.

Maj. Edward K. Elias, Air Force, agreed with Charles that they had been treated well while being held, and that there were no reprisals against the prisoners in the wake of the step-up in bombing.

Elias' father was scheduled to join Charles' wife and the mother of Navy Lt. (j.g.) Mark L. Gartley as the men were handed over to Mrs. Weiss last Sunday. But he changed his mind at the last moment and remained home. Elias' mother has been ill and the father, according to the Pentagon, had misgivings about becoming part of what Hanoi has tried to make a gala reunion and demand for the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces.

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"BETWEEN THE COMMITTEE and Hanoi, they'll wring every drop of propaganda they can out of the three men — whether the men are co-operative or not," the Pentagon spokesman concluded. "For example, there's reason to believe that those five air alerts that were sounded between the time the relatives arrived and joined the men at a downtown hotel were phony. The American reporters on hand stood outside during the alerts and never saw a U.S. plane, but the relatives were hurried off to bomb shelters.

"Mrs. Weiss has taken the occasion to repeat the lie she has said before, that we have been using released POWs to train other combat personnel. That's just not true. We've never done it, never will. But we have a sick feeling that every time she tells this lie, more people here at home or overseas believe her. It's so cruel."