

Laird, McGovern Clash Over POWs

SFChronicle

United Press

SEP 25 1972

Washington

Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird got into an angry argument yesterday over the three prisoners of war North Vietnam has released.

Laird, in Washington, accused McGovern of betraying U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam after the senator had charged that the Nixon administration was delaying the release of the three POWs by "playing politics."

McGovern, campaigning in New York, said the POWs, released to the custody of a peace delegation in Hanoi a week ago, are being detained in North Vietnam because U.S. authorities insist that they be handed over to them instead of accompanying the delegation home.

"So I call on Secretary Laird and I call on the President of the United States to let these three men come home just as quickly as pos-

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and SFExaminer 25 Sep 72.

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sible," the presidential nominee said.

In a sharply worded retort Laird claimed the charges were not true and accused McGovern of apparently being willing "to act as an agent for Hanoi."

"It is a despicable act of a presidential candidate to make himself a spokesman for the enemy," Laird said in a statement issued by the Defense Department.

"knows very well just who it is who has delayed the return of the three American officers . . . We have had no communication from the Hanoi government about any conditions relating to the release of these men."

He said that if transportation is a problem "we could have a medical evacuation plane there within 24 hours."

ARGUMENT

The Laird-McGovern argument erupted following an announcement by the North Vietnamese news agency that the three American pilots recently released from prison camps had asked U.S. authorities not to interfere with their trip home.

"I regret very much that the administration seems to be playing politics with these three prisoners of war that Hanoi already has offered to release," McGovern said. "There is nothing in the Geneva accord that requires that these prisoners be turned over to army officers. There is nothing that requires that they be delayed to go through a long period of indoctrination or briefings or debriefings."

Earlier yesterday, Laird accused North Vietnam of making "propaganda tools" out of the three U.S. pilots and their relatives who flew to Hanoi to escort them home.

Laird stopped short of directly criticizing the families who made the trip, but he acknowledged "we rec-

ommended" against it and said he was glad relatives of one of the three, Air Force Major Edward K.

Elias and Navy Lieutenant Markham L. Gartley and Norris A. Charles, the first U.S. POWs freed by North Vietnam since 1969, had been expected to leave Hanoi with their relatives Saturday aboard a Soviet airliner bound for Vientiane, Laos. They were not on the plane when it landed and U.S. anti-war activists with the group said North Vietnam had chosen a different route, apparently fearing American authorities in Laos would try to "kidnap" the flyers.

VIOLATION

Laird, claiming the Communists' actions were "absolutely" in violation of the Geneva conventions on treatment of POWs and men missing in action, also rejected a series of conditions North Vietnam laid down for release of other prisoners. Among other things, Hanoi demanded that the men be allowed to stay out of any further U.S. military activity in Indochina.

"This is absolutely in contravention and in violation of international law and international agreements," Laird declared.

The Pentagon chief was interviewed on the NBC television program, "Meet the Press."

Laird, noting that North Vietnamese officials had promised three weeks ago to release the three pilots, said they still were making the men "parade around" Hanoi and "they are even using the families of these prisoners of war as propaganda tools at this particular time."

If the United States accepted this kind of release procedure, he said, "it would take several hundred years before the prisoners of war and the missing in action were accounted for . . . there is no excuse for this kind of inhumane, absolutely cruel treatment."