

# How Free the Prisoners?

By TOM WICKER

The United States Government did not arrange for the release of the three prisoners of war now on their way home from Hanoi. Nor, so far as can be ascertained, was it any policy or action of Washington's or any words of the Nixon Administration that prompted the North Vietnamese Government to turn these men loose. Why then should the Pentagon and officials abroad be so determined to get control of these men before they even return to this country, and why should Pentagon officials including Secretary Laird be raising the threatening possibility of court-martialing them?

It goes without saying that Hanoi has its own propaganda and no doubt diplomatic purposes in releasing the three prisoners, and may even be trying in a roundabout fashion to aid Senator George McGovern's Presidential campaign. Even so, it would make more sense and be incomparably more humane and civilized if Washington simply welcomed these men home from their ordeal, let them have their say, then "debriefed" them later.

What, after all, are these men likely to know in the way of military information that would be so valuable to the war planners in the Pentagon? What are they likely to say publicly that would be so damaging to Administration policy or to the peace talks or even to Mr. Nixon's prospects? Isn't the main thing to restore these men to their families and let them alone for awhile to enjoy their new freedom?

Instead, reports that American officials would be waiting at the Vientiane airport caused the civilian delegation accompanying the released men to choose an alternate route through Peking and Moscow. In Moscow yesterday they were met by American officials at the airport and according to reports reaching here that will be the case again today in Copenhagen.

It is true that these officials insist that they only want to offer a night's lodging in the embassy residence and a continuation of the journey in an American military aircraft. But that would be, in effect, to take custody of the men if they acquiesced; and they already have made it clear that they want to come home under civilian and not military escort.

No doubt they and the civilians accompanying them recall clearly the occasion in 1968 when three released prisoners reached Vientiane in company of the Rev. Dan Berrigan and Howard Zinn of Boston University.

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They were there informed by American officials that, while they were free to do as they chose, the Department of Defense wished them to transfer to a military plane and that this word had been relayed through the White House, which concurred. It is hardly surprising that the released prisoners promptly shifted to the military plane; some time later, the only one of them ever to take a public platform recanted his original statement that he had not been mistreated while a prisoner.

The same kind of veiled threat is plain in the words of Pentagon officials who, while professing anxiety to guard the rights of the returning prisoners, have raised questions about unspecified quotes they attributed to them in North Vietnam; as well as in Mr. Laird's remark that he "can't state . . . that the code of Uniform Military Justice will not be followed."

This is in sharp contrast to the attitude of Ronald Ziegler, the White House spokesman, who has said there is no possibility the Government will bring charges against any of the returning prisoners for anything they might have done while in captivity; and who put the matter in proper perspective when he said, "These men have been through a terrible ordeal. Our interest is their safe arrival back home." That ought to be the Pentagon's interest as well, and the White House ought to enforce it.

Meanwhile, as intercontinental struggle is being waged over the freed prisoners, the House Internal Security Committee has approved a bill to prevent American civilians from visiting Hanoi. This is a measure to "get Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark" after the fact, but it has far worse defects than that futile purpose.

It appears to run afoul of a Supreme Court decision striking down travel restrictions, for one thing; for another, no legal state of war exists between the United States and North Vietnam; for still a third, the civilians who would be stopped from going to Hanoi are the only people who have ever brought any prisoners out, and the only people who have ever informed the American public about the effects of the American bombing and blockade; finally, the measure would hand even more power to President Nixon, since it would allow him to authorize visits it would otherwise forbid. If the House Democratic leadership doesn't bury a monstrosity like that, it is no leadership at all.