

With every passing day, it becomes more unmistakably evident that the American prisoners of war have become the pawns of the rival propaganda machines—in Hanoi and in Washington. The act of releasing some captives, and particularly of giving credit for the transaction to the American anti-war movement, is obviously a calculated political move by North Vietnam.

The official American response, however, is unworthy of this nation's traditions. The returning prisoners are Americans. They have served their country. They were captured while carrying out military missions, and they have suffered the agony of being prisoners of war. They, and their families deserve better than implied threats and dark innuendos of unsubstantiated charges contained in Defense Secretary Melvin Laird's hint that they might be court-martialed for what they may have said while in enemy hands.

It matters little that Mr. Laird later added that any judicial action would be tempered with "a great, great deal of mercy" and that he subsequently called it unlikely that any action would be taken. The political seed of doubt has been sown.

A similar message is contained in statements by Ambassador William Porter, the chief American negotiator in Paris, in which he characterized the release of the three prisoners as an impediment to the peace talks. The implication is once again that the men should not have left their prison until the President brings them home.

It does little credit to this country to let politics—even the politics of war—take precedence over the fate of its men. "A great, great deal of mercy" could have been demonstrated by Mr. Laird and the White House by welcoming the three officers with a show of gratitude rather than suspicion. The world would think more highly of an America secure enough in its humane tradition to renounce the temptation of joining Hanoi in playing politics with the released prisoners.