

Bungled Return of PWs

WASHINGTON — Those three American prisoners of war are back in the United States, back in the hands of their military superiors, and presumably we shall be spared any more asinine comments by their fellow Americans.

It was downright shameful to have Defense Secretary Melvin Laird uttering threats and hints that these three men might be court martialed as AWOL for keeping their vow to return home on civilian aircraft.

WHAT A SILLY commentary that Ambassador William J. Porter, the chief U.S. negotiator, had nothing more constructive to say at the Paris peace talks than that North Vietnam had made "a very cynical exploitation" of the release of the three men.

It was as though Laird and Porter were saying, "If you can't release prisoners to us, on our terms, we'd rather see them rot in North Vietnamese prisons."

It was as though someone in the administration had decided that three Benedict Arnolds were coming home, instead of three young men who served their country faithfully and bravely.

Some of the callous stupidity of our government in this instance can be attributed to the fact that this is a political year; politics has always produced brutal inanities.

But the American public has every right to ask that the government un-addle its brain and get itself together before it again has to deal with a prisoner release. Because there is a strong possibility that

the next time Hanoi moves it will again play ball with U.S. leftwingers instead of the U.S. government.

Hanoi will go on playing footsie with people like Cora Weiss, whose political extremism is obvious in her scream that "we have just witnessed a recapture scene" when the three POWs put on their uniforms and rejoined the Navy and Air Force.

That kind of nonsense we expect from Cora Weiss and her crowd, but we ought to expect more from men who run the Defense Department and the nation.

The three men cared about the welfare of their fellow American prisoners more than they cared about political posturing. So they kept their vow to return home in civilian aircraft, despite their government's suggestion they use military aircraft.

This apparently offended Laird, who seemed more concerned at scoring propaganda points against Hanoi than about the early release of the other GIs.

SENTIMENTALITY cannot wipe away the fact of the POW's responsibility to their services or the military's responsibility to them. They must undergo physical examinations and receive whatever care is required. They may be able to provide information vital to the future well-being of the other POWs.

But the Defense Department ought to remember that a man who has been locked up in North Vietnam belongs first and foremost to his family. The debriefing and the other military folderol ought to be cut to an absolute minimum.