

Inside Report

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POWs as Political Pawns

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

WASHINGTON — The agonizingly difficult choices confronting American pilots shot down over North Vietnam were underlined last Thursday in a remarkable short-wave English language broadcast from Hanoi.

Five pilots captured since August made statements describing their humane treatment and urging the U.S. government to end the war. Obviously prompted by their captors, four concluded their statements by asking relatives back home to vote for Sen. George McGovern — one implicitly, the other three endorsing McGovern by name.

IN PAST WARS, such conduct by captive American officers would be subject to discipline, as indeed it might have been earlier in the Vietnam war. But the Hanoi Politburo's persistence in using prisoners of war as political pawns, even during serious negotiations with Washington, radically revises the old rules.

The hard fact is that, in blatant violation of the Geneva Convention, North Vietnam is sharply discriminatory in handling American prisoners who do and who do not participate in propaganda operations. A current example: Mail brought from North Vietnam by the anti-war activists presiding over the recent prisoner release did not include letters from many prisoners who refuse to criticize U.S. policy.

So, official U.S. policy on POWs has undergone a quiet transformation. Prisoners are no longer discouraged from making lukewarm anti-war statements if that is necessary to let their families know they are alive and to permit an exchange of letters.

Of the three recently released, Navy

Lt. Norris Charles was one of a small group of prisoners publicly critical of U.S. war policies and regularly exhibited to outside visitors, most recently former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark.

Minnie Lee Gartley, mother of released Lt. Mark Gartley, has been associated with extremist peace activist Cora Weiss, including picket-line duty. Although her son did not object to U.S. military interrogation, Mrs. Gartley first insisted that his questioning be delayed for 30 days, finally scaling down her demand to two days. When refused, she did not spend time with her son at a military hospital but instead hit the television circuit to attack the military.

Lt. Gartley became so incensed at being paraded around Hanoi for propaganda purposes that he threw his chopsticks at a server during a Hanoi banquet.

The result is self-defeating for Hanoi. Just when American public opinion seemed moving toward major concessions in return for release of all POWs, North Vietnam's clumsy propaganda efforts deflected the issue.

POLLSTER Albert Sindlinger's daily national telephone interviews found deep resentment over the return of the three POWs and a suspicion that McGovern had something to do with it.

Accordingly, any U.S. reaction to Hanoi's latest ploy of broadcasting McGovern endorsements by recently captured pilots cannot be favorable. And if such an endorsement plus pro forma anti-war statements are needed for an officer to inform his loved ones that he is alive, he need fear no disciplinary action from his government.