

Risner, POW Leader, Says Protesters Prolonged War

2/28/73

By Jack Taylor

Special to The Washington Post

OKLAHOMA CITY, Feb. 27

—Air Force Col. Robinson Risner, former camp commander of the "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner of war compound, says antiwar protesters in the United States prolonged the Vietnam war and delayed the release of the American POWs.

"I feel beyond any doubt that those people kept us in prison an extra year or two," Risner said in an interview. "Not just the people demonstrating but the people who were downing or bad-mouthing our government and our policies."

Risner said he believed the POWs would still be in Hanoi if Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) had won the November election.

Risner, who spent seven and one-half years as a POW, said he and his fellow prisoners felt only anger and dismay at U.S. protesters.

Risner refused to discuss antiwar statements attributed to him and other POWs in Communist broadcasts over the years. He said he wished he could tell the full story behind those statements, but cannot for fear of jeopardizing the safe return of the POWs still to be released.

Shortly after his release, Risner said: "We should consider the sources of those statements; they were made from prison in North Vietnam. At no time during my imprisonment have I failed to support my President and my country and my President's policy, and never have I been prouder of my country and my President."

The 48-year-old fighter ace, said the Communist captors kept the pilots well informed

on anything bad about the United States.

"Anything that was against our government, our policy or our way of life came to light immediately," he said. But he added that the fliers never trusted the Communists or believed their propaganda.

"I have said that I was fighting for the freedom of the right of people to dissent, and I was," Risner said, "but it did not keep me from being angry or resentful because I feel beyond any doubt that those people (the antiwar faction) kept us in prison an extra year or two.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the Communists took great comfort and heart from the people who demonstrated and bad-mouthed our government.

"It was very evident to all of us that the Communist spirit or morale went up and down along with the amount of demonstrations, protests and antiwar movement back in the states," Risner said.

"In '68 and '69 they felt sure that our government was going to be pressured, and this was what they told us day after day, our government was going to be pressured into coming to terms favorable to themselves simply because they said the protest movement was growing by leaps and bounds.

"We got all the information that they could provide us of all the protests," Risner said. "They even showed us movies taken at the demonstrations.

"Up until a few months ago—up until President Nixon won the election, which was irrefutable proof that the people supported him and his policies—they were still telling us he was going to lose. They

were still telling us that Sen. McGovern was going to win.

"Our motto of our organization was 'Return With Honor.' We did not feel that we could carry that out if Sen. McGovern had been elected President," Risner said.

"I said to the men—and I think they agreed with this—that as fearful as it seemed to have to live under those conditions, that I would stay another four years rather than sacrifice what we had been fighting for and to me that's what it seemed like.

"I could not see stopping aid to the countries that I knew needed aid. I could not see abandoning our friends and allies. Nor could I see the Vietnamese ever keeping their promises to a person who would come and beg for the prisoners.

"That's when he lost us—is when Sen. McGovern said, 'If necessary, I will come to Hanoi and beg for the prisoners,' because we know the Vietnamese would only have taken advantage of him and I think we would still be in prison."

Risner said he believes President Nixon's policies—including stepped-up bombing and the B-52 raids against the Hanoi-Haiphong area last Christmas—proved effective.

"On the 18th of December—I think that was the first night of the B-52 raids—there was never such joy seen in our camp before," Risner said.