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The Son Tay Raid: A Study In Presidential Policy

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** The Son Tay Raid: A Study In Presidential Policy

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**Thesis:** The raid on Son Tay was primarily designed to relieve the plight of American Prisoners of War (POW) held in North Vietnam. But more importantly, the raid was deliberately conducted as an extension of an overall Presidential policy to end America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

**Discussion:** The Presidential election of 1968 not only ushered in a change in American leadership, but it also signaled a significant change in the commitment to the war in Southeast Asia. The new Administration's policy was known as "Vietnamization," a process by which South Vietnam would take control of the war while America withdrew its combat forces. Furthermore, this policy would be executed in the face of the American political defeat at the hands of the Hanoi led government. Through Vietnamization, the President launched several military operations which were a direct extension of political force by military means. The Son Tay Raid was a manifestation of the Administration's resolve to achieve its political goal in Vietnam. Resulting from domestic political pressure, the raid was originally conceived and organized as an attempt to relieve the suffering of American POWs. However, the Administration realized the greater political significance and impact the raid could have not only on American interests but also on Hanoi and its supporters. Thus, the focus of the raid shifted from a purely humanitarian mission to one of furthering a policy through direct military intervention. The intent of this paper is to explore the Nixon Administration's policy and link it to the events which led to the raid, the raid itself, and the impact of its aftermath on the American public.

**Conclusion:** The raid on Son Tay is a perfect example that war is an extension of a nation's diplomacy through other means. Where diplomacy had failed the POWs, military action in the

form of a raid almost immediately improved the conditions for the POWs. Additionally, the raid on Son Tay was planned as a deliberate rescue mission, but as policy changed so did the intent of the mission. The raid had a two fold purpose; improve conditions for the POWs, and at the same time, send a political message for Hanoi to consider when conducting future negotiations with the United States. Finally, the significance of Nixon's policy and how it was applied can not be overlooked because it allowed America to maintain its status as a superpower, still capable of countering threats to its international interests.

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## THE SON TAY RAID: A STUDY IN PRESIDENTIAL POLICY

*"Freedom is the sure possession of those alone  
who have the courage to defend it."*

- Pericles<sup>[1]</sup>

The raid force approached the hamlet of Son Tay in North Vietnam at 0230 hours on 21

November 1970. Flying over the hills at treetop level, the helicopters and their escorts could see the yellow lights of Hanoi winking in the cool night air. Suddenly, they were over the camp at Son Tay and the sky, which had been bathed in the pale light of a waning moon, exploded in brilliant light as flares and muzzle flashes filled the night sky. The escort aircraft fired on preselected targets and dropped fire-fight simulators in several locations near the camp. Simultaneously, the lead helicopter passed over the camp and destroyed two guard towers with a laser beam like stream of bullets. Seconds later, another helicopter executed a planned crash-landing into the middle of the camp as its blades chewed into a high tree. The helicopter hit the ground with a thud and fourteen heavily armed raiders burst from the crippled machine with chainsaws, axes, and bolt cutters in tow. The fourteen liberators began fighting their way to the prisoners' cells. Amid the confusion of combat a blaring bullhorn announced that Americans had landed and were here to rescue POWs. The prison came alive, cracking with fire of automatic weapons. A large explosion blew a hole in the prison wall as the raiders from a third

helicopter which landed outside of the camp made their entrance. Meanwhile, another helicopter landed at a location that looked very similar to the Son Tay POW camp. Within seconds of touchdown, the disembarked raiders found themselves in a huge fire-fight unfolding all around them. Four violent ground battles were now raging within the Son Tay area: one at the prison, another at an undisclosed location, and two faked by air delivered fire-fight simulators. However, before the helicopter could get back to pick up the force deposited by mistake, the raiders had killed approximately 150 enemy soldiers without any raider casualties, while the location burned like a roman candle. Back at the prison camp, nearly 60 enemy guards lay dead or wounded as the raiders swarmed over and through the camp like robots. As the raiders broke into one cell after another, they were reporting "negative items" (no prisoners). After the last cell was opened and the other cells checked again, the mission commander was informed that the search was complete with no items. The raiders were stunned to find that the prison was totally empty of POWs. The raid force departure was as quick and ghost-like as their arrival, leaving behind a wake of death and destruction as their calling card. However, they left empty-handed. The Son Tay Raid was over. What had gone wrong? Had the mission been compromised? Had the raiders fought their way out of a poorly executed trap? Was the mission really designed to rescue POWs or was there some other motive? What political intentions and ramifications did the current Administration seek? Was the war in Vietnam about to take a dramatic turn from the stated policy of Vietnamization? In an attempt to answer these questions, this paper will examine the political/strategic goals and intentions of the Administration's policies regarding the war in Vietnam. More specifically, was the policy reflected in the actions taken at Son Tay?

### **SETTING THE STAGE: NIXON'S POLICY**

During the 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon, well known as a hard-line anti-Communist, proposed a plan to end the war and ran his campaign based on a peaceful withdrawal from Vietnam. Nixon did win the Presidency and many believed he won it by his

stance on ending the war.<sup>[2]</sup> Upon assuming office in January 1969, Nixon ordered an internal governmental survey of American involvement in Vietnam. The results, published as National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM-1),<sup>[3]</sup> noted "emphatic differences" among the various agencies on how to defend and withdraw from Vietnam. Perhaps the largest area of disagreement was over the bombing strategy employed, then later stopped by President Johnson. It appears that the division over the bombing arose not because it was a bad way to ensure a peaceful withdrawal, but because of the manner in which the Johnson Administration used the bombing campaign. Specifically, targets were selected by the President and his staff in Washington. If Nixon were to employ such a tactic, many of his supporters feared that this might also lead to a perceived escalation of the war, resulting in another round of public demonstrations. Since NSSM-1 had confirmed the divisions between government agencies and bureaucrats on the overall conduct of the war, Nixon would use this confusion among the established system of governmental "checks and balances" to his own advantage by freely acting without the concurrence or nonconcurrence of those agencies in his policy decisions. In other words, organized internal governmental opposition (Democratic Party, Republican infighting, etc.) to his policy would be almost non-existent. However, Nixon had several major considerations, both domestic and international, which would affect the development and execution of his policy.

The first issue was the growing anti-war movement. Many Americans were ready for an end to the war because measurable gains at any level (political and military) were far outweighed by the rising cost in American lives and economic resources during the previous five years of the conflict. Secondly, and inextricably linked to the first issue, was America's long-standing investment in and commitment to the protection of South Vietnam. This issue would inherently cause conflict and contradiction in the face of establishing a withdrawal policy when considering the billions of dollars of aid and thousands of lives expended for an apparently futile effort. Additionally, Nixon was concerned that the USSR and China would view this "retreat" and change in American policy as a victory for world communism. If America failed to stop communist aggression, then the "Communist Revolution" was sure to succeed. In a July 1969 speech, Nixon would sum up these concerns by saying:

The way the war ends in Vietnam will have an enduring impact upon events, although the domino effect is not necessarily valid. It is easy to feel that we should get out of Asia at all costs. The war plagues us at home, is costly in our relations with the USSR, and offers all kinds of temptations to our politicians. Yet if the Vietnam war goes sour, there would be an escalation of not just "get out of Vietnam sentiment" but "get out of the world sentiment." And this would be disastrous. Should we abandon Vietnam, there would be far more blood spilled than if we remain steady in our purposes.<sup>[4]</sup>

Nevertheless, Hanoi continued to stall at the Paris negotiations in hopes that the American anti-war movement would force the Administration to withdraw almost unconditionally from Vietnam. Aware of Hanoi's diplomatic tactics, Nixon would have to establish his policy quickly in an attempt to strengthen his position and bargaining power. For several months, Nixon tested the waters by maintaining a policy towards the war which was not significantly different

from that of his predecessor. However, now the time had come to implement his style of leadership through actions regarding the war in Vietnam that differed significantly from that which the world had come to expect of Washington. This change would catch many governments off guard, especially those of Hanoi and other leading communist states.

First, Nixon would adopt Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's term of "Vietnamization" by officially establishing the policy of turning the war over to South Vietnam to prosecute as "their" fight with assistance from the U.S., much like what America provided during the early days of the conflict prior to 1964 (military equipment and advisors). Nixon believed this first step would appease congressional critics and stifle the anti-war movement. By taking this unilateral action, Nixon was "placing the ball in Hanoi's court" as a sign of good faith, hoping that this initiative would produce meaningful negotiations in future sessions at Paris. Second, he put Vietnam at the center of American foreign policy. Any international policy activity would include some stance or action favorable to an independent South Vietnam. In other words, negotiations with any country or government would not be conducted or concluded unless some aspect of support concerning South Vietnam was part of the final settlement. Nixon exploited this aspect to his advantage since China and the USSR were looking to expand trade agreements and begin talks on limiting strategic weapons with America. Thus he used both countries to put pressure on Hanoi to cooperate through negotiations. Finally, Nixon would reinforce his policies of Vietnamization and international diplomatic pressure through an honorable settlement of the war by "massive military retaliation" if Hanoi did not negotiate in good faith or attacked American forces in the South.<sup>[5]</sup> It seems as if Nixon was declaring and perhaps even establishing an unofficial cease-fire with the implementation of Vietnamization. However, would Hanoi receive the same message, and if so, would they be motivated or compelled to cooperate?

Anticipating that Hanoi would elect to "misinterpret" or not "fully understand" his actions, Nixon would back up the threat of massive military retaliation through his "madman theory." H.R. Halderman, Nixon's Chief-of-Staff, would recall how this theory was to be employed. Nixon said, "We'll just slip the word to them (directly referring to Hanoi and indirectly to the USSR and China) that, "for god's sake," you know Nixon's obsessed about communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry, and you know he has his hand on the nuclear button."<sup>[6]</sup> A very risky theory indeed. However, Nixon believed he could keep China and the USSR at bay on such an issue, considering the upcoming negotiations on limiting strategic weapons. This author could not conclusively determine if either country ever directly "called" Nixon's threat of a nuclear strike or how his "madman theory" affected the outcome of future negotiations. Nevertheless, would Nixon have really "nuked" North Vietnam or any other country for that matter if his "madman theory " had been put to the test? A most interesting question indeed, but beyond the scope of this paper.

### **LINKING THE POLITICAL STRATEGY TO SON TAY**

Of all the issues involving the war, maybe none was more emotional and controversial than that of the POW and Missing in Action (MIA) situation. The White House realized this issue could have considerable positive political ramifications for the Administration if strengthened

negotiations could quickly bring a solution leading to a POW release. However, since taking office, the Administration's efforts on this issue had produced no results despite the activity by domestic and international groups on the behalf of POWs and MIAs(see Appendix A). On 3 February 1970, believing that the time had come to

increase efforts on this issue, Nixon ordered the creation of a small, action-oriented team to, "Concentrate full-time on all possible ways, conventional and unconventional, to bring to bear on the Hanoi government pressure sufficient to revert its view of American captives as an asset to one in which they are considered a liability."<sup>[11]</sup> This decision was the genesis for a study later conducted to examine the feasibility of a POW rescue. However, according to Secretary Laird, the original concept of a POW rescue was his idea, as he initiated low-level internal Department of Defense (DOD) planning for such a raid in late 1969 following Hanoi's release of three POWs. At the time, Laird directly controlled a special group in the Pentagon assigned to locate POW camps and track movement of POWs. Most of this activity was accomplished through the use of aerial reconnaissance.<sup>[12]</sup> Regardless of authorship, the importance of establishing a POW action-team cannot be underestimated. First, it gave the organizers of the raid the needed political power to study, establish, train, and finally execute such a mission. Secondly, it allowed the development of policy options which the President could initiate through his continuing efforts to end America's involvement in the war.

Having sent Hanoi a clear message with the attack into Cambodia, Nixon focused on his policy of peace through negotiations from what he believed to be a stronger diplomatic position. From this stronger position, pressure concerning POW/MIA issues was applied through all available diplomatic channels. Nixon realized that Hanoi's treatment of POWs could be put in the "spotlight" of not only domestic, but also international concern. Perhaps this single issue, once elevated and given the appropriate diplomatic priority, would cause a dramatic outcry in world opinion, thereby pressuring Hanoi to release all known POWs and provide information on MIAs. Nonetheless, Hanoi would fight Nixon's attempts step by step because Hanoi had stated repeatedly that the release of American POWs would be part of the final negotiated settlement to end the war. The POWs would not be treated as a separate issue.<sup>[13]</sup> In other words, Hanoi would use the POWs as bargaining chips until the U.S. was "fully committed" (a term Hanoi never publicly defined) to withdrawal or even perhaps until all U.S. forces had departed South Vietnam.

During the spring and summer of 1970, efforts to gain release of the POWs intensified as Nixon continued to apply pressure on Hanoi through diplomatic means. He was aware that if diplomatic pressure could not bring about the release of the POWs, then he would most likely have to use some type of military action as he had done in Cambodia. His decision on what type of action would elude him until the plan to raid a POW camp surfaced in July 1970.

As military planners continued to collect information and plan for a POW rescue, Nixon kept pressure on Hanoi by keeping the POW/MIA issue at the front of all negotiations (formal/informal to include secret meetings) in Paris. In July of 1970, Nixon received a briefing for a possible POW rescue attempt at the Son Tay camp. He was ecstatic about the raid, giving full authority and control of its conduct to Laird.<sup>[14]</sup> Nixon now had a military means to

effectively back up his policy of negotiations if Hanoi could not be convinced diplomatically to release the POWs. He would make one more attempt at negotiating a POW release before sending another "signal" to Hanoi.

On 7 October 1970 Nixon proposed "The immediate and unconditional release of all Prisoners of War held by both sides."<sup>[15]</sup> This offer appeared to be extremely generous since Saigon held approximately 35,000 POWs to Hanoi's 3000.<sup>[16]</sup> Hanoi refused the exchange. Once again, Hanoi would not recognize any of its POWs held in South Vietnam because they had stated on numerous occasions that North Vietnam had no forces in the South, be they regular army or Vietcong.<sup>[17]</sup> As far as Hanoi was concerned, Saigon only had suspected Vietcong in their

prisons. Once again, the use of military force to forward Nixon's policy on the POW/MIA issue took center stage. The only decision remaining would be when to execute the raid in order to achieve the best possible political effect. After all, the target camp had been identified and the raiding force was nearing completion of their training for the mission.

### **INTELLIGENCE AND THE DECISION**

Intelligence collection was essential because the decision to execute would be based almost entirely on the surveillance data. As a result of the surveillance, enemy strengths in the area were known, so most of the collection centered on POW activity at Son Tay. From May to November of 1970, collection revealed that the camp was "active," but hard evidence (photos of POWs at the camp or other definite signs) was never uncovered by any fly-overs prior to mission execution. Intelligence analysts believed that this camp housed POWs based on the observed activity and conditions of other POW camps positively known to contain prisoners.<sup>[18]</sup> Additionally, secondary confirmation on the presence of POWs at Son Tay could not be achieved. Apparently the intelligence agencies involved in the mission had no other collection means (ie., human intelligence) in the area specifically tasked to provide confirmation of the primary collection sources. Furthermore, it is unknown if special units (government or military) were "delivered" into the area at any time prior to mission execution for surveillance and confirmation. It is highly unlikely that any such attempt was made because enemy detection of such a unit would compromise the mission. Based on intelligence collected during this time frame (May-November 1970), Generals Blackburn (Special Assistant for Counter-Insurgency and Special Activities (SACSA)) and Bennett (Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)) and Admiral Moorer (Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)) recommended a "Go" and forwarded their decision to Laird for approval. Blackburn, Bennett, and Moorer were members of the Pentagon action/decision group for the raid. This recommendation, followed by Laird's approval, allowed the raid force to deploy forward and await the execution order.

Meanwhile, no new developments had occurred in negotiations since Hanoi refused Nixon's offer on 7 October. However, on 13 November 1970, peace activist Cora Weiss was given the names of six known POWs who had died in captivity. The information was considered extremely reliable because it was provided by the North Vietnamese front organization known as The Committee of Solidarity with the American People.<sup>[19]</sup> Justification for action was

perhaps clearer now than ever before. Nonetheless, a final decision was needed since the tentative date for mission execution was 20-21 November (How the date was selected will be discussed later). At the urging of Blackburn, Laird finally decided to brief the President on 18 November, recommending execution of the mission. As Commander-in-Chief, Nixon was the only person who could approve mission execution. Admiral Moorer briefed Nixon, Kissinger, Laird, Richard Helms (Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)), and Secretary of State William Rogers on all information and details concerning the raid on Son Tay. Nixon was very receptive and took few notes during the meeting (Nixon was famous for carrying a yellow note pad; the more notes he took the less pleased he was about the topic). Moorer ensured that the President understood the raid was required and would be successful. Nixon did understand this and informed Moorer that he would give him his decision very soon.<sup>[20]</sup> The "Red Rocket" (NCA's execution message) needed to go out as soon as possible in order to give the raiders time to make final checks and be ready to execute by the 21st of November. As an indication of approval, Nixon asked, "How many more POWs will we find dead if we wait much longer?" This question was an obvious reference to the 13 November information provided through Cora Weiss. After several moments with no response, Nixon stated, "How could anyone not approve this?"<sup>[21]</sup> Needless to say, the briefing as presented was an overwhelming success. If Hanoi would not negotiate on the POW/MIA issue willingly, then Nixon would take direct military action. One way or another, Nixon would force Hanoi to the negotiating table under conditions favorable to the U.S. and South Vietnam. Nixon was undoubtedly confident that the raid would bring success to his overall policy and specifically towards the POW/MIA issue. Nixon made the decision quickly. Within hours of the briefing, the "Red Rocket" message went out from the Pentagon to the mission commander at 1730 hours, 18 November 1970.<sup>[22]</sup> As if confirming the decision to execute, photo imagery taken on the evening of 18 November was interpreted as showing "increased activity" at Son Tay.<sup>[23]</sup> Perhaps if only for a moment, a "warm and fuzzy" feeling contented the decision makers. However, within hours this feeling would be shattered. Once again, timing was everything!

During the evening of 18 November, General Bennett received information from a reliable source<sup>[24]</sup> that Son Tay was not an active POW camp and no POWs were currently held there. The next day Bennett and Blackburn hastily attempted to confirm this information with additional unscheduled reconnaissance overflights of the target area. Bennett was convinced that this new information was accurate and correct, regardless of previous photo reconnaissance of the camp. Blackburn was somewhat critical of the new information, preferring to believe the results of past intelligence collection. So emphatic was Bennett's belief that he classified the information as B-3 (foreign source and usually reliable with direct access to the informant and information). Blackburn was still not convinced and would wait for the results of the unscheduled overflights. As fate would have it, weather and equipment problems would prevent any additional flights. Around mid-day (19 November), Bennett and Blackburn met with Admiral Moorer and relayed the latest developments. Moorer, aware of these developments, was obviously concerned and asked for their opinions on a "Go" or "No-Go" decision. Bennett was cautious, leaning towards a delay. Blackburn, on the other hand, still believed that "someone" was at Son Tay and the mission should go. After all, Blackburn had a stack of information which indicated POWs were at Son Tay and now there was only a



single piece of paper that indicated otherwise.<sup>[25]</sup> Blackburn also saw the bigger picture in this decision. He would later recall, "With a 95 to 97 percent confidence factor that the raiders could get in and out safely, it was worth the try even if the POWs were not there."<sup>[26]</sup> At least they would have tried to do something on behalf of the POWs. Little did Blackburn know at the time, but he and Nixon shared the same thought process on this issue. Having heard the opinions of both men, Moorer decided to brief Laird the following

morning. Hopefully, the additional time would allow for reconsideration and/or confirmation regarding to the new information. If confirmed to be accurate, enough time would be available on the morning of 20 November to brief the NCA and deliver any changes to the raid force prior to their scheduled launch time.

The following morning, Moorer, Bennett, and Blackburn again met to discuss the new developments. As it turned out, Bennett had a change of opinion. He had reconsidered his position based on all the information collected to date on Son Tay. Bennett arrived at the same conclusion Blackburn did on the day before. Therefore, Bennett recommended a "Go." That recommendation was enough for Moorer to agree that the mission should be attempted, since he also believed that the POWs were still there. It was good that all three "confirmed" what they wanted to believe because the raid force mission commander had given the final preparation and execution order to the raid force earlier that morning. It is apparent that Moorer's decision to wait had paid off because anything less than a unified recommendation from his office probably would have led to an abort by the NCA. However, there was still enough time to do just that with another "Red Rocket" if Nixon or Laird deemed it necessary in light of the Hanoi source information. Therefore, with Bennett at his side, Moorer went to brief Laird on the recent developments.<sup>[27]</sup>

Laird did not hesitate in agreeing with Moorer's recommendation to proceed despite the new developments. Laird was committed and fully understood Nixon's policy and to what extent the President would go to make his point once diplomatic efforts failed or produced insufficient results on a specific issue. Laird's resolve and conviction over the POW/MIA would be

reconfirmed in his eyes because, within an hour of Moorer's departure, Richard Helms arrived to discuss the information obtained from the Hanoi source and also brought additional news concerning the POW issue. The CIA had intercepted recent "traffic" and confirmed that as many as 11 more POWs had died in captivity in addition to those reported on 13 November.<sup>[28]</sup> Laird knew he must immediately inform the President of these developments. However, exactly what and how he told the President is an issue which is still debatable.

Laird did, in fact, brief Nixon around mid-morning on 20 November, still several hours prior to the scheduled departure time of the raid force. Research indicates that at least four other sources believe that Laird did tell Nixon about all of the new developments and that they both agreed without much discussion that the mission should continue. However, according to Laird (see Appendix B), he denied briefing Nixon that a source from Hanoi two days earlier had

indicated there were no POWs at Son Tay. He did admit to informing Nixon about Helm's information concerning the deaths of 11 more POWs. Laird stated that, "Nixon had already approved the mission in July 1970 and authorized its execution on 18 November 1970. I was placed in charge of the mission, responsible to brief the President as updates were required or requested."<sup>[29]</sup> Laird called Nixon several hours prior to the launching of the force for any last minute Presidential concerns, much as he had always done on previous occasions. As far as Laird was concerned, the decision to execute was final and the new information concerning the POWs, regardless of accuracy, would not change that decision.<sup>[30]</sup> At this point, apparently the execution of policy was more important than "cluttering" the decision with new information, regardless of its potential impact. Would the President have aborted the raid had he known about the real possibility of no POWs at Son Tay, especially when that information was coming from the Secretary of Defense?

Research indicates, and it is the judgment of this author, that the President would not have aborted the mission in light of this information. Whether or not the President was briefed about the Hanoi source information is irrelevant. After all, the final decision to carry out the raid had been made. In other words, there was no political "smoking gun" (any Presidential "wrong doing" associated with the decision to execute or continue) to be found on this specific issue. However, if the Hanoi source information proved to be true, Laird would take all the blame if the mission turned out to be a total failure. Apparently Laird's decision not to brief Nixon would provide Presidential "plausible deniability" in case the mission met with tragic results. Having established Nixon's policy towards ending the war in Vietnam and what part the raid would play in that policy, let us review the leadership, execution, and reaction to the mission in order to understand the complexity and significance of the Son Tay Raid.

### **THE STORY: ORGANIZING, PLANNING, EXECUTING**

By the spring of 1970, more than 1400 Americans were listed as POW or MIA. Of the 1400, approximately 500 were being held in North Vietnam.<sup>[31]</sup> With the war in Southeast Asia changing hands through the policy of Vietnamization, political and military concern grew as North Vietnam began to use the POWs as "bargaining chips" more now than in previous years. In other words, Hanoi would use the POWs at the Paris Peace Talks to ensure America continued its scheduled withdrawal from South Vietnam.

By the spring of 1970, American and international awareness of the plight of the POWs had grown substantially and was perhaps at an all time high since the outbreak of the Vietnam War. Reports from the few POWs released or interviewed while in captivity revealed the harsh conditions, cruelty, and death threats that most of the POWs were subjected to on a daily basis. Anxiety, concern, and anger among the families and military/government leaders was more than evident as massive letter writing campaigns were directed at both Hanoi and the U.S. Congress in attempts to pressure both governments into action on this issue. After all, two years of talks had produced no POW exchanges or releases and in light of recent negative POW reports, something had to be done.

The military establishment was convinced what actions had to be taken in order to maintain

the American fighting spirit for the remainder of the Vietnam War and future conflicts. Military intervention on behalf of the POWs would be required. Perhaps a successful rescue mission could provide a rallying point, giving the country an overdue and sorely needed positive perspective on the war. Perhaps the final "straw" justifying a rescue came with the release of three POWs in late 1969. The information they provided about their treatment served to solidify the concept of a rescue as the only means to end the suffering of POWs. Therefore, Admiral Moorer directed General Blackburn to study the feasibility of a POW rescue mission.<sup>[32]</sup> If viable, a raid would raise POW morale, act on the POW/MIA concerns of the American public, and hopefully convince Hanoi to release or improve the overall condition and treatment of all remaining POWs. Finally, it would demonstrate American resolve by solving/addressing all POW/MIA issues prior to America's departure from Southeast Asia.

In May 1970, Blackburn had concluded that a POW rescue was highly practical based on current military capabilities and could be successful provided strict secrecy concerning the mission was maintained. This proposal became known as *Operation Polar Circle*.<sup>[33]</sup> JCS was delighted over the prospects, but their excitement was tempered by the likelihood of a negative American political reaction, especially in light of the established troop withdrawals. Due to this initial perception, approval to organize such a mission was delayed for several months until the idea had the appropriate political backing. Finally, in late July 1970, a Joint Contingency Task Group was formed and the operation received the code name *Ivory Coast*.<sup>[34]</sup> Moorer briefed Laird on *Ivory Coast* and Laird immediately approved formation, training, and support of the rescue group. Within days, Laird briefed Nixon on the details of *Ivory Coast*. As previously discussed, Nixon agreed with the concept and placed Laird in charge of overseeing the mission while keeping Nixon informed on its progress prior to deployment. General Leroy Manor was selected to be the mission commander and Colonel "Bull" Simons was appointed deputy commander and ground raid force commander.<sup>[35]</sup>

Based on the previous feasibility study, a helicopterborne raiding force augmented by fixed wing fire support under the cover of a deception plan designed to draw Hanoi's attention away from the selected POW camp could be successful. The primary raid group would consist of: one H-3 and five H-53 helicopters for transport of the raid force, two MC-130's for navigation and objective area support, two HC-130's for aerial refueling, five A-1E's for fire support, ten F-4's to provide MIG CAP (combat air patrol), and one F-4 (Wild Weasel) to draw the SAM's (Surface-to-Air-Missile) away from the raiding group.<sup>[36]</sup> The ground raid force consisted of 59 hand-picked Green Berets. All raiders, including the aircrews, were volunteers. Approximately 500 personnel requested assignment to the force. Additionally, none of the volunteers knew exactly what they were going to do or where they were going to do it until several hours prior to the actual launch.<sup>[37]</sup> Eglin Air Force Base was selected as the training site; specifically, Auxiliary Field 3 was the location of their training. Coincidentally, some 28 years earlier Auxiliary Field 3 had hosted yet another daring group, known as "Doolittle's Tokyo Raiders".<sup>[38]</sup> However, prior to commencement of training, a POW camp had to be identified.

Selection of a camp was no simple matter. The camp would have to be accessible by air assault, contain POWs, and be located in an area that would entail the least risk to the raiding

force yet provide the greatest amount of surprise, all within the range and capability of the mission assets and personnel (see Appendix C). With the aid of in-theater and national assets, several camps stood out as possible targets. These camps had been under previous surveillance based on signs of POW activity. Following rigorous evaluation of the camps most closely adhering to the above criteria, Manor and Simons settled on Son Tay with the selection known only to them and the Washington planners/decision makers. The decision on Son Tay was by no means an easy task. A few details about Son Tay highlight the difficulty of this decision. The camp was located 23 miles west of Hanoi, multiple air defense batteries were located in the area, an estimated 12,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops were dispersed within 5 miles of the camp, an estimated 70 POWs were currently held there, and a one way trip from the departure base at Udorn Thailand to Son Tay was approximately 240 nautical miles.<sup>[39]</sup> Finally, if the above facts concerning the Son Tay area were not enough to cast doubts about a successful operation, the entire mission would be conducted at night. Additionally, a massive deception plan was employed which was designed to draw North Vietnam's radars away from the Son Tay area. The deception plan fit perfectly into overall mission execution. This deception was very plausible due to an earlier shutdown of an unarmed reconnaissance flight over North Vietnam. This shutdown violated an "agreement" (more of an unwritten understanding) made with the Johnson Administration which allowed U.S. overflights for reconnaissance collection. In return, the U.S. would stop bombing North Vietnam. Additionally, North Vietnam would not shell any major population centers in the South and refrain from using the established Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for Southern infiltration.<sup>[40]</sup>

The raid commanders knew that for the mission to be successful several months of intense, realistic training were required. Therefore, commencing in early August 1970, the raid force began its training on a mock up of the prison with all training occurring at night. During the day, the reconstructed camp (known as "Barbara") was "rolled up" to ensure that detection from Soviet "systems" would not occur.<sup>[41]</sup> As the raiders continued to train, all raid force members improved their skills. After nearly two months of preparation, Laird personally received a briefing from Manor and Simons on 24 September 1970 whose conclusion was that, based on training to date, the mission could be executed successfully.<sup>[42]</sup> During the first week of October, the White House received a briefing on the status of the raid force. The National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and selected members of his staff, to include General Al Haig, were present at the briefings given by Manor and Simons. All were extremely receptive to the plan. Manor also wanted immediate approval of the mission in order to execute the raid by 21 October. Kissinger advised Manor that the President was not available (Nixon was out of the country attending a conference and it is unclear why Kissinger could not reach him) for such an approval but he would be available to approve an approximate mission date of 21 November.<sup>[43]</sup> The 21st of October and November were the two established windows of opportunity, based primarily on the illumination of a full moon. October 21 was desirable because the raiders were ready and the time delay associated with the second window could compromise the security of the mission. Since Kissinger could not or would not brief the President in time for the October date, 21 November became the approximate target date for the mission. On the positive side, the extra 30 days would allow for additional training and intelligence collection, although the possibility of a breach of security weighed heavily on

Manor and Simons.

The CIA, DIA, and the National Security Agency (NSA) continued to receive surveillance reports from Son Tay and the surrounding area. Since there was no established inter-agency collection plan and no specific agency tasked to coordinate and provide intelligence information

to the raid force, information was delivered directly to the raid commanders as each agency collected from its own sources. Needless to say, information requests and resulting data were duplicated and at times led to confusion during planning and training. However, since General Bennett (Director of DIA) was a member of the Pentagon planning/decision team, all information collected was "funnelled" through the DIA. Nonetheless, surveillance to date had shown "activity" in the area of the camp and even as late as July had shown that the Song Con River, just north of the camp, had flooded and water was only several feet from the walls of the prison (an interesting point reviewed in a later footnote). Additionally, recent collection was a bit spotty because of poor weather conditions and the detection and shutdown of reconnaissance drones scheduled to overfly the area. However, what was collected still indicated POW "activity" at Son Tay.<sup>[44]</sup>

In order for the mission to have the greatest chance of success, strict adherence to the established timeline was critical. Deployment to Thailand began on 12 November and by 17 November all raiders were assembled at Udorn Air Base. The following day, Nixon approved the mission and released the "Red Rocket" message authorizing Manor to execute as planned. Thus *Operation Kingpin*, the last phase of the raid was activated and takeoff of the raid force was set for 2300 hours, 20 November 1970.<sup>[45]</sup> However, it seems that when good news arrives, bad news is usually not too far behind. This mission was not to be the exception. As previously discussed, on 18 November, information received from a Hanoi source indicated that Son Tay was not currently occupied by POWs.<sup>[46]</sup> Attempts to confirm or deny this information met with little success. Apparently the information had come too late to have any impact on reversing the execution order. By now, all personnel involved in the raid, to include the political leadership, were "leaning well forward" into the mission. However, for unclear reasons (some speculate operational security and an established communications "black-out" to the raid force), the raiders were not informed about the most recent development. Apparently, everyone in the raiding force chain-of-command knew about the possibility of no POWs at Son Tay except for the raid force and its leaders. According to one of the raid force pilots, Marty Donohue, Colonel USAF (Ret.), this belief was highlighted by the "official" mission patch created after the raid. The patch contains a caricature of a mushroom and at the bottom of the patch are the letters KITD/FOHS: "*Kept In The Dark, Feed Only Horse S\_\_\_!*" The decision to continue was quite difficult because the information passed from the Hanoi source identified other "active" POW camps where the former Son Tay POWs were possibly being held (Later verification placed the Son Tay POWs at Dong Hoi, also known as Camp Faith, located 10 miles west of Hanoi).<sup>[47]</sup>

Since August, the raid force had been training for a mission without knowing the exact location and purpose of their mission. Several members of the force believed they were going to Cuba

to end the current dictatorship in one way or another.<sup>[48]</sup> Due to the requirement for strict secrecy, the raiders would be "kept in the dark" until several hours prior to the launch of the raid. Moments before the final mission briefing, Colonel Simons told the assembled group that, "We are going to rescue as many as 70 American POWs, something American prisoners have a right to expect from their fellow soldiers. The target is located just 23 miles west of Hanoi."<sup>[49]</sup> For several seconds after the Colonel's remarks, an eerie silence fell over the room only to be followed by a loud standing ovation. One of the boldest military missions in history was about to unfold.

At approximately 2300 hours on 20 November 1970, all elements of Task Force *Ivory Coast* began departing on their assigned missions. Over 100 aircraft launching from bases and carriers flew missions in the vicinity of the Tonkin Gulf (east and southeast of Hanoi in the Haiphong harbor area, see Appendix C) where they dropped flares and chaff (used to disrupt and "blind" radar scopes). Bombing missions were not allowed due to the previously discussed "agreement." The deception plan worked perfectly as all "eyes" were turned eastward, allowing the low flying raid package to attack the camp undetected.

The raid force entered the Son Tay objective area below 500 feet. Suddenly, the MC-130's broke-off and dropped illumination flares over the camp area and then proceeded to a location approximately seven miles west of Son Tay where they dropped fire-fight simulators followed by a pallet of napalm, thus effectively illuminating the area and creating yet another diversion/deception. The A-1's attacked and destroyed a nearby bridge which would slow any reinforcement attempts made by local forces. Simultaneously, the lead H-53 crossed over the Son Tay prison and eliminated two occupied guard towers with its 7.62mm mini-guns (known as a GAU-2/B, a six barrel Gatling gun capable of firing either 2000 or 4000 rounds per minute). Behind the lead H-53, the H-3 made a controlled crash landing into the center of the camp. All personnel in the H-3 were unharmed with the exception of one of the crewmen who broke an ankle. The 14 raiders on board were the designated assault group and they immediately attacked the building containing the cell blocks, eliminating any remaining enemy personnel. These raiders were assigned to actually remove the POWs from their cells and guide them out of the compound through a hole in the prison wall created by a planned demolition. Once outside the camp, the POWs would be escorted to a nearby pick-up point and evacuated with the raid force.<sup>[50]</sup>

Meanwhile, the second and third H-53's, which contained the second assault force, assigned to search and defend the surrounding camp area, began their landing. The only error made during the entire execution of the mission was about to occur. A compound located several hundred meters to the south of Son Tay was identified during the planning phase of the mission as a "secondary school." Upon this determination, the compound was immediately designated "off limits" to the raiders. However, this compound was very similar in shape and size to Son Tay. Because of this similarity, all aircrews and assault members were thoroughly briefed on the differences between the two locations. But due to the fog and friction of combat, the third H-53 containing Colonel Simons' assault force landed in the middle of the secondary school compound. The second H-53 did not land there because the aircrew saw the attack

occurring at Son Tay at the last minute and corrected their course. For undetermined reasons (most likely for radio silence), the second H-53 did not relay this information to Simons' aircraft which was in trail of the second H-53. As Simons' assault force unloaded the helicopter, they came under immediate attack from the direction of the secondary school. The helicopter lifted off as planned, to await a later extract call from Simons. For the next five minutes an intense fire-fight developed at the secondary school compound. Realizing that the compound was not the prison camp and the school was not a secondary school, Simons ordered the H-53 to return for an emergency extract. Within minutes, all raiders were back on the helicopter heading for the prison camp. Remarkably, only one raider received minor wounds during the fight. As a result of this "error", over 100 enemy soldiers lay dead at the compound. Perhaps unknowingly, this mistake may have prevented a disastrous reinforcement of the Son Tay camp which would have been completely unexpected by the raid force. Additionally, the soldiers encountered at the school compound looked (uniforms and physical features to include language) and reacted differently than expected, raising the question whether the only enemy soldiers in North Vietnam were North Vietnamese.<sup>[51]</sup> Simons immediately began asking questions of himself as to who they were and what they were doing in a secondary school which obviously was not being utilized as a school, or was it? Most people familiar with the raid believe that the soldiers encountered at the school compound were either Chinese or "Eastern" Russians providing "technical assistance" to North Vietnam's new and improved integrated air defense system (IADS), furnished by one or both of the communist superpowers.<sup>[52]</sup>

At the Son Tay compound the prison assault force had completed its mission. At least 12 enemy had been killed, but more importantly, no POWs were found in or around the compound. A message of "negative items" was soon relayed to General Manor at his command-post located in South Vietnam. The only remaining tasks were to ensure that all raiders were accounted for, board the helicopters, and leave the area in the direction from which they arrived. The prison wall was breached and the H-3 was intentionally destroyed. The assault forces linked up with the H-53's and began their long trip back to Udorn.<sup>[53]</sup> Three and a half months of intense training culminated in less than 30 minutes at Son Tay. The raid had taken 29 minutes to execute, one minute less than scheduled.<sup>[54]</sup> Mission surprise was complete and undeniable. All the raiders who went in came out, with only two sustaining minor injuries. As the raiders returned to Thailand, their thoughts soon refocused as questions began to emerge. Why were there no POWs at Son Tay? Had Hanoi known they were coming? How would their efforts be perceived? The answers to most of these questions came soon enough, although several questions still remain unanswered.

Over 150 aircraft launched as part of the task force. Only two were shot down, but both pilots were recovered successfully by the egressing helicopters. As a result of the mission, American forces had suffered only two minor personnel injuries and the loss of two aircraft while Hanoi (China? USSR?) lost approximately 150 soldiers and sustained a huge blow to its sense of security. After all, the Americans had just conducted an operation at will in Hanoi's own backyard, catching them completely by surprise. A special "wake up" call had just been delivered. Nevertheless, most raiders initially felt dejected since they had not rescued any

POWs. They believed the raid had been a failure even though they were highly praised and personally decorated for their efforts by President Nixon. It would take several months for many of the raiders to realize the overall importance of their mission. On the other hand, Hanoi publicly denounced the overall attack but made no initial mention of the Son Tay portion of the operation. Perhaps Hanoi was still confused or embarrassed over the Son Tay action. To many, Hanoi's response was its typical rhetoric which could never be publicly proven as fact. Except in this case, the raiders could testify to the actions taken at Son Tay. Furthermore, reaction to the raid and its results would have far reaching consequences not only for the raid force but also for both country's governments, the POW/MIA issue, and world opinion. Perhaps none was more significant and diverse than the impact on the American government and its military establishment.

## RAID REACTION

Despite the successful execution of the raid, public response was varied. World opinion<sup>[55]</sup> seemed to focus on a heroic effort for a noble cause, yet questioned the true motivation of the operation. War escalation seemed to be the hot topic of conversation in most international media circles. However, the American public appeared to react with indifference to news of the raid. Apparently, the news of the raid was just another day in a war which seemed to have no end. No new or significant public demonstrations were reported as news about the raid began to surface. Most of the country's media praised the attempt but questioned the results. Perhaps this cool response was due to several years of efforts by a host of groups which worked publicly to bring the suffering of POWs to the forefront of a war weary population. Most families of POWs approved of the raid despite the risks of reprisals against remaining POWs. During a debate on the Senate floor concerning the raid, Senator Bob Dole (R-Kansas) related a story from three wives of current POWs. When he asked their opinion about the raid and its possible

implications, their response was, "It is better to have our husbands die in a rescue attempt than rot to death in a prison camp."<sup>[56]</sup> Furthermore, thousands of telegrams praising the attempt were sent to the White House. Many were from the families of POWs and MIAs and contained responses such as, "Thanks for trying to get our daddy out of that camp. Please keep trying."<sup>[57]</sup> Still others stated, "This type of action should have been tried before and should still be attempted in future actions. Keep trying Mr. President."<sup>[58]</sup> Additionally, *Opinion Research Corporation*, a nationally recognized and respected group, sampled 208 next-of-kin of personnel listed as either missing in action or prisoner of war. Eighty one percent approved of the rescue attempt and 84 percent would approve of another attempt. Also, 60 percent indicated that future raids would be successful and were an effective means of gaining information and release of POWs and MIAs.<sup>[59]</sup> These opinions quickly overshadowed others who believed that the raid and any future attempts would only endanger POW lives and make information on MIAs more difficult to obtain. Perhaps the mother of a POW best summed up the American public reaction to the raid, "Finally something had been done to relieve their suffering and focus attention to their situation."<sup>[60]</sup>

The reaction by the U.S. military establishment was perhaps best summed up by Admiral



McCain as he received a debriefing from Manor and Simons shortly after the raid. "Don't let

anyone tell you that this mission was a failure. We will learn, as the results develop, that many benefits will accrue as a result of having done this."<sup>[61]</sup> A true statement, but the results of the raid would not be fully known for several years to come. Pride in execution was obvious for military members who knew about the raid. This was especially true at the highest levels of command as senior members took note of the Communist military reaction to the raid and actions immediately implemented by those countries.<sup>[62]</sup> Their reaction gave American military leaders a much needed "shot in the arm." By flexing its muscles, the U.S. demonstrated its ability and will to strike unhindered any target in North Vietnam at the time and place of its choosing. Undoubtedly, the raid contributed to a new found respect for American military skill and resolve.

Admiral McCain's prediction would prove to be correct. As a result of the raid, conditions did change for the POWs. Hanoi began consolidating the POWs into fewer locations. Their harsh treatment eased dramatically. They were allowed to "socialize" freely at designated times and most were finally housed with roommates. Most began regularly receiving letters and packages from home while medical and health care improved. Finally, the POWs were allowed to hold organized physical training, administrative meetings and religious services on a much more regular basis.<sup>[63]</sup> Needless to say, morale of the POWs soared. Apparently Hanoi got the message that America and the free world would never forget about the POWs and their suffering. On the basis of these improvements alone, many believed that the raid was worth the effort and was highly successful. However, at the same time, most POWs were not sure what triggered the sudden improvement in their treatment. Perhaps nothing would improve the morale and spirits of the POWs (short of being released) more than if they had knowledge of the attempted rescue at Son Tay. This opinion was confirmed following the release of the POWs several years later. A POW debriefing given by then Air Force Captain Sam Johnson (currently serving as a U.S. Congressman from Texas) perhaps best describes this fact. In 1966, Johnson was shot down over North Vietnam and became a POW at the "Hanoi Hilton." During the early hours of 21 November 1970, he recalled watching aircraft drop flares over Hanoi. He had not seen any activity like this since the bombing raids over North Vietnam had stopped nearly two years ago. Watching this attack did raise his hopes of liberation but it would not be until the summer of 1971 that the significance of the attack would be fully appreciated. He had recently received a box of hard candy from his wife.

I plopped one in my mouth and sucked on it. I felt something stiff, like a tiny plastic sliver, stick against the roof of my mouth. When I picked it out, I found it to be a tiny brown speck, about the size of a pinhead. I rubbed it between my fingers, and it began to unfold. Amazed, I rubbed some more. In seconds, it had opened to the width of 16mm film. It was microfilm of the front page of the New York Times telling all about the Son Tay raid. The young guys with good eyes could read it and give us the details. We knew then that our country had not forgotten us.<sup>[64]</sup>

However, the reaction to the raid on the political home front was less popular. Political division over the raid served to further confuse not only the American public's understanding of the

policy regarding Vietnam, but also highlighted the dissension between the two parties over the President's policy towards the war. Approximately half of the Washington law-makers apparently disapproved of the rescue attempt as political attention was focused on a hearing held by the politically powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

On 24 November 1970, Senator J.S. Fulbright (D-Arkansas), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, invited Secretary Laird to testify on the Son Tay raid and associated diversionary attacks. Fulbright believed a major escalation of the war had just occurred and no one was supplying the stated goals or desired outcome of the most recent military actions. The 15 members of the committee met to determine the intent of the administration's policy and the political implications of the raid. Fulbright personally believed that the only way to end the war was through a negotiated peace as the French had done in ending their involvement in Vietnam a decade and a half before. He was alarmed, as were most of the committee members, due to what now appeared to be very similar policies between the Nixon and Johnson Administrations on the conduct of the war. After all, Nixon had pledged to withdraw from Vietnam even though the recent military actions generated by his policy appeared to indicate otherwise. Specifically, Fulbright was concerned about the military actions which appeared to be contradictory to stated policy. Furthermore, this contradiction in policy seemingly confirmed his personal belief that neither President (Johnson and Nixon) wanted to be the one in the White House to "lose" America's first war.<sup>[65]</sup> However, Fulbright's motives for the hearing appeared to be more political and personal than anything else. Little did Fulbright know at the time, but the spectacle created by the public hearing would generate a backlash of general criticism against him and the committee. Apparently the hearing served to further alienate the American public from its Washington leadership, ultimately sending conflicting signals of resolve to Hanoi and the rest of the world.

Secretary Laird, having served in the Senate for 17 years, was well prepared for the hearing. Laird was able to keep the hearing focused on the emotional issue of the POWs. He provided long answers to the committee's questions and always started with or returned to the POW/MIA issue. This tactic also demonstrated how unfamiliar and ill-prepared the Senators were on this issue (contributing to the belief that the hearing was nothing more than a political and media-hyped sideshow). In his testimony, Laird perfectly articulated and defended the President's policy on Vietnam and focused the nation's attention on a highly explosive and emotional issue that even the staunchest anti-war activist would support. Nevertheless, the committee (predominantly Fulbright) still believed a major escalation had occurred and this might jeopardize any possibility of a quick end to the war. Moreover, the committee believed that no POWs were rescued due to an intelligence failure. Laird did not agree with these perceptions. Furthermore, of all the questions asked of Laird, perhaps the ones asked by Senator Al Gore did hit at the center of the intelligence issue. First, Gore asked about the authorization and execution order. Who gave them and when? Secondly, he inquired about the quality and type of intelligence used to determine which camp to hit and when to hit it? Gore's first question was easy to answer. The President authorized the raid in the summer of 1970 and gave the execution order on 18 November 1970. The answer to the second question was not provided because the response was classified. However, the committee later received the

answer in a classified supplement to the hearing.<sup>[66]</sup> If Gore had pursued his questions more forcefully, maybe information provided to the legislators would have been more forthright and less confusing, perhaps resulting in less political turmoil over this issue. However, the political activity on this issue was far from over as the following day saw a heated debate on this topic on the Senate floor between "pro" Senators Bob Dole, John Stennis, and Henry Jackson while Senators Edmund Muskie, Edward Kennedy, and Robert Leggett disagreed with the rescue attempt and Nixon's policy towards Hanoi.<sup>[67]</sup>

As a final and rather amusing note on the political reaction to the raid, Senator Fulbright gave a complete explanation in his own words as to why he called the hearing on Son Tay. In the *Congressional Record* of 4 December 1970, Fulbright explained that he believed the raid would only escalate the war and jeopardize a negotiated settlement as the withdrawal from Vietnam continued. He further stated his resolve on the POW/MIA issue by reviewing several letters he had written to highlight his personal concern to Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong (Premier of North Vietnam), The International Red Cross, and finally to The National League of Families of POWs and MIAs in Southeast Asia. Following the hearing, Fulbright received hundreds of letters criticizing his actions. Several of the letters sent to Fulbright read like this:

As citizens of the State of Arkansas, we are writing to inform you of the shame we now feel that you have brought upon us. Your socialistic views which have been flaunted before the entire country have not reflected the beliefs which are basic to all of us Arkansans. Your recent actions and public expressions against the POW campaign were humiliating to us as U.S. citizens, and especially as residents of the great State which you so poorly represent. Be assured that our votes, though they went to you in the last Senatorial election, will not be cast for you in the future.<sup>[68]</sup>

Still another said:

Since you are such a hack for negotiation I have a suggestion which you might pass on to the negotiating "team" in Paris. Let's offer one Senator from Arkansas for just one of our prisoners of war. I'll bet after 30 minutes you'd be happy for someone to send in a rescue mission. In fact, I'll bet you won't even follow my suggestion, even though you seem to think the commies are just a nice little peace loving group.<sup>[69]</sup>

Fulbright could not understand why he had gotten so much "hate-mail" over the hearing and his actions therein. He was truly miffed that most Americans did not share his opinion on this issue. Therefore, he felt compelled to fill the *Congressional Record* with six pages of his "explanation." Fulbright had to explain (a political apology) himself again since the televised hearing had shown him and the committee "playing politics" with an emotional and humanitarian issue where politics had no business. The raid had proven to be an explosive issue and a mission overdue in its execution. Considering all of the previously discussed information, did the President make the right decision by selecting Son Tay as the next milestone in his policy of Vietnamization? In other words, what political and military risks did Nixon take in conducting the raid?

## A "WIN-WIN" FOR NIXON

Within the context of Nixon's policy towards Hanoi and those actions taken by the Administration in carrying out that policy, the raid was just another step in the implementation of his strategy to end the war honorably for America. It is true that the impetus for the raid came from several years of activity by certain groups on behalf of the POWs, but Nixon realized he could use this issue to gain public support and exploit it in any way he saw fit. This not only benefits the POWs but, his Administration and his policy as well. In other words, the raid was a "win-win" proposition for Nixon. First, he had taken action on behalf of the POWs, thereby showing his resolve to the world on this issue. Second, Nixon, along with the rest of his staff and planners, was convinced (they all fell in love with the plan) that the mission would be a military success. In keeping true to his strategy, Nixon's policy of negotiation would be followed by an operational application of that policy. If Nixon could not get Hanoi's attention through negotiations, then he would get it through military action as he had demonstrated once before in Cambodia. The first half of this "win-win" proposition was political in nature. The second half focused on the military execution of the raid and the risking of American lives. Obviously, the second "win" involved much more risk than the first. The first "win" does not require much of an explanation. The political aspects and ramifications seem clear in light of previous discussion. However, less clear is the second portion of the "win-win" proposition. In an attempt to evaluate and understand the risks associated with the military "win", two scenarios may serve to highlight this conclusion.

With the first scenario, there are POWs at Son Tay. With this assumption, military risks are inherently greater. As a part of the previously conducted raid study, a high probability existed that some POWs would be killed by their guards during the rescue attempt. Furthermore, it was likely that any reprisals against all remaining POWs in North Vietnam would be severe as a result of the mission. Thus, the decision to act required careful deliberation among the planners and the NCA. However, everyone from Nixon down to the individual raider believed the raid was worth the risk even if only one POW came out alive (this opinion was shared by most of the POWs and their families although many congressional leaders would publicly disagree). After all, the raiders were all volunteers, willing to risk their lives or even become POWs themselves. How could anyone belittle such a courageous and honorable attempt to rescue American servicemen under severe duress regardless of the risk or chances of failure? Ultimately, this scenario saw a "win" even though American lives would most likely be lost during the raid. The risk was worth the effort and the President made his final decision based on this risk assessment.

With the second scenario, there are no POWs at Son Tay. This scenario also assumes that the White House and the Pentagon knew beforehand (exactly when they knew is irrelevant) that there were no POWs at the camp. Moreover, one must also realize that the true intent of the mission had changed. The raiders were not going to rescue POWs, instead they were delivering a political message. From the standpoint of risk assessment, the second scenario would seem to possess less risk when compared to the risk associated with the first scenario. In other words, if the raid was going to be "successful" with POWs at the camp as proposed in

the first scenario, then would not the overall risk be reduced if no POWs were at Son Tay? After all, wouldn't Hanoi get the same political message through the actions of either scenario? With this rationale, both scenarios do appear to give a political and military "win" situation providing the raid force was not completely destroyed during the mission (see Appendix D for an opposing view). With either scenario, Nixon could have his cake and eat it too. However, in the second scenario, the only thing missing would be the icing.

### **IN CONCLUSION: A QUESTION TO CONSIDER**

Having explored both the humanitarian and political origins of the raid, perhaps a final thought provoking question remains, was the Son Tay Raid a rescue mission or an attack? In the opinion of this researcher, it was both! A noble and honorable attempt had been made by a gallant force to relieve the suffering of their brothers-in-arms, but the raid also possessed the elements of a deliberate attack to carry out Presidential policy. Undoubtedly, had POWs been rescued at Son Tay, immediate success would have been acknowledged by all, perhaps even resulting in uniting a divided America. Yet, at the same time, but unfortunately out of public view, the raid was an immediate success because Hanoi quickly began direct negotiations and took rapid action to correct their past transgressions regarding the treatment of POWs. By linking military actions to strategic goals, as was demonstrated by the raid on Son Tay, it is evident that President Nixon emerged from the latest round of "negotiations" as a winner, although not immediately recognized as such.

Perhaps there will always be speculation concerning the raid. For example: Prior to the mission, did the NCA or any other planner/decision maker know that there were "in fact" no POWs at Son Tay? Perhaps some did, but for unknown reasons elected to remain silent on the issue. Additionally, did Colonel Simons' raid group land at the secondary school on purpose and if so, who ordered it and why?<sup>[70]</sup> Furthermore, when were the POWs actually moved from Son Tay?<sup>[71]</sup> And finally, why were the POWs moved?<sup>[72]</sup> All of these questions call for additional research. Nonetheless, it is difficult to argue with positive results like those which occurred after the raid. Hanoi's response was to break off official peace negotiations in Paris and publicly denounce the U.S. for escalating the war. Unofficially, Hanoi, China, and the Soviet Union were shaken by the raid. All tightened security at their military compounds and other sensitive locations. Additionally, previously classified White House documents revealed that Hanoi began responding to official requests concerning POW issues as early as 26 November 1970, something they had rarely done before. Hanoi was also concerned that American public opinion was now focused on the POW/MIA issue, especially since confirming that many POWs had died in captivity. Hanoi finally got the message and began to fear a change in international and American public support for the war since the raid had highlighted such a sensitive issue.<sup>[73]</sup> In light of these and other developments, the raid was an overwhelming success as both a rescue mission and an extension of policy. The President's decision to support his policy through military activity directly resulted in forcing Hanoi to treat POWs more humanely and forced Hanoi back to Paris in a more humble negotiating position.

Without a doubt, Hanoi now knew it was dealing with a new Administration determined to see an end to the war, but only in an honorable manner. On two occasions the President had

shown Hanoi his resolve and to what lengths he would go to ensure that his style of diplomacy should not be misinterpreted. Hanoi knew it had better pay attention lest it risk waking a lethargic giant with a new attitude.

## **APPENDIX A: POW POLITICAL TIMELINE UP TO SON TAY**

### **(Nixon Administration)**

#### **Chronology of Events**

**January 1969** President asks Ambassador Lodge to call for prompt POW talks at his first session in Paris.

**March 1969** Administration undertakes review of POW policies.

**May 1969** Secretary Laird news conference setting forth in detail the treatment accorded our men and expressing the deep concern of President and Administration regarding the POW situation.

**June 1969** Administration spokesmen begin meetings with families to inform them of efforts on behalf of POW/MIA.

**November 1969** President proclaims November 9, 1969 a National Day of Prayer and Concern. Also, U.S. makes major statement of concern in United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee.

**December 1969** President meets with representative group of POW/MIA family members.

**February 1970** President signs Public Law 91-200 removing limits on savings program for POW/MIA.

**March 1970** At President's direction, Paris Delegation begins weekly pressure on enemy regarding POW/MIA problem.

**May 1970** President sends message in support of May 1 Appeal for International Justice, at which vice President spoke. President proclaims May 3 as a National Day of Prayer and Concern.

**June 1970** President signs Public Law 91-289 authorizing special compensation up to \$5.00 per day for period spent in POW status.

**August 1970** President sends special representative, Astronaut Frank Borman, around world to enlist support and assistance for POW/MIA.

**October 1970** President proposes immediate release of all POWs in October 7 message.

## **APPENDIX A: POW POLITICAL TIMELINE UP TO SON TAY (CONT.)**

## (Nixon Administration)

**November 1970** Postmaster General Winton Blount meets with Ambassador David Bruce to discuss an appeal to the Government of North Vietnam. Postmaster meets with International Red Cross in Geneva. Postmaster in Atlanta for commemorative stamp ceremony which honors POWs and MIAs. President Nixon authorizes rescue mission to Son Tay.

This timeline was taken from a letter dated 1 December 1970, by Herbert G. Klein, Director of Communications for the Nixon Administration. The letter and enclosed timeline were found in the Charles W. Colson file under "POW/MIA." Colson's file is located at the National Archives II, within the *Nixon Presidential Materials* section.

### APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW WITH MELVIN R. LAIRD

#### (Secretary of Defense 1969-1973)

1. **Question:** Did the Son Tay Raid indicate a change in the political decision process?

**Answer:** Yes. Nixon's policy of withdrawal through negotiations would be pursued by military action if those negotiations did not produce the desired results. Nixon had done this with the bombings in Cambodia and would continue this type of "strongman" tactic throughout his Presidency.

2. **Question:** Could the American public have supported a new war against Hanoi with the POW/MIA issue as the focal point?

**Answer:** Yes. I was the first to bring the issue to the full attention of the American public. We had been receiving information about the harsh treatment and in many cases, POWs dying in captivity. During 1969, three POWs were released which highlighted my concerns so I began to take action. Many in Congress and in the Administration disagreed with me because they did not want Hanoi to make a public issue out of the situation if pushed, since they believed Hanoi had the upper hand in this issue, thus putting the U.S. in a position to be dictated to in public. As it turned out, that is exactly what Hanoi did and that is part of the reason why I and the Administration went to Son Tay. We knew we had to do something.

3. **Question:** Was the Raid a "Win-Win" situation for the President?

**Answer:** Yes. No POWs were killed and the raid force performed superbly through out the mission. If POWs had been at the camp we would have gotten them out. As it was, no POWs were there but the effects the raid had on the enemy were noticed almost immediately afterwards. Do you understand? The President followed through on his policy and the actual raid was a success. Do you understand? How could anyone not call it a success?

4. **Question:** How did the Raid affect future rescue operations?

**Answer:** Did you read Schemmer's book? We had discussed and even did some planning for another raid and you can bet this time we would bring POWs out. However, due to Son Tay,

the POW/MIA issue began to move as real progress was seen at the political level and it was reflected in the overall peace talks. As a result of this progress, the idea of another raid gradually faded, after all, two years later most of the POWs had been released.

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW WITH MELVIN R. LAIRD (CONT.)**

### **(Secretary of Defense 1969-1973)**

5. **Question:** What message if any, did China and Russia receive as a result of the Raid?

**Answer:** The message was for Hanoi only. However, if China or Russia could bring pressure to bear on Hanoi in regards to the POW/MIA issue, that was okay too.

6. **Question:** Did you know at anytime prior to the Raid that no POWs were at Son Tay?

**Answer:** No. All the intelligence we had indicated that POWs were at the camp. I had been involved in this intelligence collection for quite some time and I had seen several other camps which we had been looking at for a long time. Son Tay gave no indication that POWs were not there. We knew the camp was active and had been for several years. The decision to execute was based on this intelligence. However, we knew that there was a possibility that no POWs were there. After all, we had no hard evidence of their presence, only indications from camps known to house POWs that were similar to the conditions and activity found at Son Tay. The raid force knew of this possibility also. Do you understand? I know what you are asking. The Hanoi information was simply not believable.

7. **Question:** Did you brief the President on the Hanoi source information?

**Answer:** No. The decision to go had already been made. Do you understand? I believed the information to be inaccurate. I informed the President about new information concerning the deaths of additional POWs being held. The CIA passed that as many as 10 more POWs had died in captivity.

**Additional Comments:** Mr. Laird was very polite during correspondence prior to and during the interview. This author was honored by Mr. Laird's attention, concern, and thoughtfulness on this issue. Mr. Laird also said that he had personal files concerning the raid and the period while he was Secretary of Defense that would not be released until a future date.

This interview was conducted over the telephone on 17 December 1996. The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The answers provided by Mr. Laird are summations of the questions asked. The answers are not exact quotes. Rather, they were reconstructed from notes taken during the interview and at the best recollection of this author.

## **APPENDIX C: SELECTED ILLUSTRATIONS**



## APPENDIX C: SELECTED ILLUSTRATIONS (CONT.)

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Reproduced from *The Raid*, p. 188.

## APPENDIX C: SELECTED ILLUSTRATIONS (CONT.)

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Reproduced from *The Raid*, p. 190.

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN SCHEMMER

**(Author of *The Raid*)**

1. **Question:** Do you believe that President Nixon knew there were no POWs at Son Tay prior to mission launch?

**Answer:** The Nixon tapes, obviously, are the best source for that answer. Until you can check those out, I think Laird gave you the best insight possible into whether or not President Nixon knew there were no POWs in Son Tay just before the mission was launched (*according to Peter Jeffrey, an archivist on the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff located at National Archives II, informed this author that, during the period of the Son Tay raid, Nixon had not yet installed his tape recording system in the White House and to his knowledge, no other personal recordings exist which cover the raid period*).

2. **Question:** Do you believe there was an overriding political agenda associated with the raid?

**Answer:** No. I believe the overriding agenda was to free the POWs at Son Tay. I believe all other considerations were secondary at best --- except in the case of General Donald Blackburn, who, as I pointed out in *The Raid*, wanted to "go" anyway because he thought it would really pull North Vietnam's chain (and Russia's to a lesser extent, by showing them that if they didn't "shape up," we could operate in their back yard with impunity).

3. **Question:** In your opinion, was the raid a "Win-Win" proposition for the Administration regardless of "risks" associated with its execution?

**Answer:** No. The Operation could have backfired badly in several ways. What if it had failed tragically --- many POWs killed, or the raiding force annihilated? It was definitely not a "win-win" proposition, given all the things that could go wrong in the fog of war.

4. **Question:** Do you believe that the military actions taken in Cambodia, at Son Tay, and the resumption of bombing North Vietnam signaled a policy change to Hanoi from that of the stated policy of "Vietnamization"?

**Answer:** Did it signal a policy change? In a large sense, Yes --- that we were exasperated over North Vietnam's intransigence on the POW issue and their treatment of our prisoners, and that the game might get very rough if they didn't change. And it's clear the North got the message, given the haste with which they rounded up all the POWs from the outlying camps

and brought them together in Hanoi and treated them so much better.

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN SCHEMMER (CONT.)**

**(Author of *The Raid*)**

5. **Question:** Could or would the American people support an escalation of the war focused on the single issue of returning POWs and opening dialogue concerning MIAs, and could this issue have been a rallying point for changing the character of the war?

**Answer:** Would Americans have supported an escalation of the war over the POW issue? I doubt it. Look at the flak Laird and the President took during the Fulbright hearings over Son Tay right after the raid, a very humanitarian mission. That was brutal! By then, after Cambodia, My Lai, Lam Son, etc., I think the ONLY escalation of any nature that MIGHT (though I doubt it) have won public support would have to deal DIRECTLY with bringing the POWs home. It was simply too late. Earlier, maybe; after 1970, I doubt it.

**Additional Comments:** In addition to this interview, Mr. Schemmer and this author had several telephone conversations where he seemed genuinely concerned and interested by this research topic, not to mention the fact that he was very professional and courteous. Mr. Schemmer's book, *The Raid*, is highly respected by all those who took part in the mission. Several cited sources testify to this belief and many share the opinion of retired USAF Colonel Frederic "Marty" Donohue (commander of the lead H-53 on the raid and an acquaintance of this author) that, "*The Raid*, is 100 percent accurate!"

This interview was conducted through electronic mail on 18 December 1996 between Mr. Schemmer and this author.

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