

Son Tay

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Laird, Fulbright Clash: Did CIA Know of Raid?

By ORR KELLY
Star Staff Writer

Sen. J. William Fulbright, D-Ark., said today that Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told him he had not been consulted before the attempted rescue of American prisoners at Son Tay in North Vietnam.

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, who was testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, replied that he had personally briefed Helms in his office at the Pentagon three or four weeks before the mission.

The CIA had no immediate comment on the conflict in the

accounts given by Fulbright and Laird.

The exchange came as Fulbright was pressing Laird to make available the two leaders of the rescue mission for questioning by the committee, which Fulbright heads.

Fulbright said he wanted to find out whether American officials knew the prison camp was empty before the raid. The raiding party came away empty-handed.

"We were convinced we had a fifty-fifty chance of returning with prisoners of war," Laird declared.

Fulbright then said he understood the CIA was not involved and that the planners of the raid had relied solely on Defense Department intelligence.

"All agencies were consulted," Laird declared. "Information from all agencies was taken. . . ."

"That is not very accurate. . . ." Fulbright broke in. "I personally asked the director (of Central Intelligence) whether he had been consulted and he said, 'no.'"

"The director came to the Pentagon and was briefed by me . . . three or four weeks before the rescue mission," Laird declared.

Fulbright broke in to ask whether the briefing could not have been as much as three months before, but Laird ignored the comment and continued:

"There was no effort made by the Defense Department not to consult or to keep the director or the Central Intelligence board away from this information. We

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drew on the entire intelligence community."

Earlier, in his attempt to learn whether prisoners were known to be there or whether the raid had been conducted for some other purpose, Fulbright got Laird to agree to supply the committee with intelligence photographs Laird had studied before giving the go ahead for the raid on Nov. 20.

Laird insisted that the purpose of the raid was to rescue American prisoners, but he also said it had the additional purpose of "letting the world know we cared."

Fulbright said he could think of several good reasons for the raid, including the desire to demonstrate concern for the prisoners.

"I am very disappointed you have doubts about this. . ." Laird responded.

Laird and Adm. Thomas Moorer, chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, insisted they did not know before the raid that there were no prisoners in the camp and, in fact, thought there was a good chance of a successful rescue.

Fulbright, however, said it seemed to him there was a better chance for the raiding team to "get in and get out," as Moorer had put it, if there were no prisoners than if there had been prisoners present.

Exchange of Remarks

Laird, who has been angry at Fulbright since the senator questioned Laird's veracity in a television interview on Nov. 29, challenged the senator to point out any statement where "you think I've told you anything that didn't have a basis and absolute truth. . . ."

"I made the decision and I've answered your questions and I think they should be accepted as true," Laird declared.

"I never suggested you have bad motives," Fulbright declared. "I think you are as good an American as anybody can be."

If he had had to make the decision whether or not the raid should be carried out, Fulbright said, "I might have made the same decision under the same circumstances."

"But if the prisoners were there it could have been extremely hazardous and I would have hesitated."

Doubts Need for Call

Laird broke off the exchange by saying he did not see why any of those who took part in the raid or their leaders should be called before Congress to defend their bravery.

The Fulbright committee has before it a bill to commend the heroism of those involved in the rescue attempt. Fulbright's attempt to turn consideration of that bill into an investigation of the raid itself drew a sharp rejoinder from Sen. John Sherman Cooper, R-Ky., who is one of the sponsors of the resolution.

"This simply goes to the bravery of the men," Cooper told Fulbright. "If we are going to investigate the raid I think we can separate these things. I don't see why we don't pass it (the resolution)."