

# Groupthink, Politics, and the Decision to Attempt the Son Tay Rescue

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Shortly after 0200 local time on 21 November 1970, a raiding force of 56 men began one of the most daring American operations of the Vietnam War, a nighttime raid 23 miles west of Hanoi on the Son Tay prisoner of war (POW) camp. The Son Tay raid was conceived in May 1970 based on imagery suggesting that 70 American POWs were being held at this isolated compound in the heart of North Vietnam. The raid's six-month planning and training process, under the leadership of Brigadier General Leroy Manor (USAF) as overall commander, and Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons (USA) as his deputy, stands as arguably the preeminent model of all special operations missions conducted by the US military. A highly disciplined, joint team with clear lines of authority and responsibility organized the raid while mobilizing extensive intelligence and logistical resources to achieve their mission of effecting a rescue. The raiders rehearsed 170 times under the most realistic possible conditions, including night live-fire exercises in a complete Son Tay mockup built at Duke Field, Florida.<sup>1</sup> Mission security was assured through rigorous compartmentalization and the practice of completely tearing down the camp mockup prior to daily Soviet satellite overflights.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the D-Day invasion had hinged on suitable weather forecasts, the Son Tay raid was executed in a tiny window of nights dictated by the need for adequate moonlight and the vagaries of the tropical monsoon season. After final approval, the strike force launched from Thailand and expertly re-joined 15 aircraft in total darkness under radio silence. Two MC-130 *Combat Talons* led a low-altitude night ingress, penetrating the North Vietnamese air defense system via direct terrain masking through corridors identified by the

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National Security Agency. Due to the vastly different cruising speeds of the helicopters, the MC-130s were obliged to fly at 105 knots, 145 knots below their normal cruising speed and 10 knots above stalling speed, for the entire three hour, 23-minute trip to the target. The US Air Force aviators participating in the raid flew 368 sorties and logged 1,017 hours preparing for this incredibly demanding mission.<sup>3</sup>

The strike force approached Son Tay undetected at 0218 on 21 November 1970. Simultaneously, the US Navy began a massive diversion operation over Haiphong Harbor.<sup>4</sup> The first phase of the rescue plan called for an HH-53 helicopter to overfly the prison courtyard and destroy two guard towers with gunfire, a task executed perfectly. Next, an HH-3 was intentionally crashed inside the Son Tay compound. Raid planners believed the aircraft would fit, but six months of additional tree growth snared the helicopter as it arrived, causing a harder-than-expected landing and one of only two US injuries of the raid, a broken ankle.<sup>5</sup> The 14 men in the crashed HH-3 were tasked to neutralize the compound guards and immediately begin freeing prisoners; unfortunately, they soon discovered there were no American POWs in the camp. At this moment, the only miscue of the raid came into play: a navigation error landed the largest part of the strike force—22 men, including Colonel Simons—at the “Secondary School” 400 meters south of the main Son Tay compound. The raiders encountered minimal resistance at the Son Tay compound itself, but Simons and the men at the Secondary School found themselves engaged in a firefight with soldiers who were “much taller than Orientals and not wearing normal NVA [North Vietnamese Army] dress.”<sup>6</sup> Simons and his men had stumbled on a major force of Chinese or Russian advisors a mere 400 meters from the prison; the Americans decimated more than 100 occupants of the Secondary School before rejoining the main strike force and initiating a withdrawal.<sup>7</sup> The raiding force was on the ground in North Vietnam for 27 minutes, flawlessly executing their well-rehearsed plan and successfully switching to a contingency plan after the unplanned landing at the Secondary School.

Three days after the raid, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird convened a Pentagon news conference to announce that a raid had been attempted, but “regrettably no prisoners were found.” Twelve minutes and five seconds

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into the news conference, a reporter asked the Secretary “on whom do you blame the intelligence failure,” thus setting the tone for all subsequent press analysis of the Son Tay mission.<sup>8</sup> Despite the strike force’s bold achievement in killing over 100 enemy troops and penetrating the heart of North Vietnam with impunity, the initial public reaction to the raid was one of disappointment for its failure to rescue any POWs.

### *The Intelligence Picture*

The discovery of the Son Tay camp was the product of a painstaking reconnaissance imagery search undertaken by the 1127th Field Activities Group, an obscure unit at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Tasked with locating active POW camps, analysts at the 1127th first identified camp activity at Son Tay on 9 May 1970 after discovering POW uniforms arranged in the courtyard in the shape of the letters “SAR,”<sup>9</sup> and rocks arranged in the letter “K,”<sup>10</sup> both search and rescue codes. “What really grabbed our attention was another pile of rocks that had been laid out in Morse Code that said there were at least six men in that prison who were going to die if they didn’t get help fast.”<sup>11</sup>

Through the remainder of May 1970, a joint planning team analyzed additional photography and sought sources of confirmation. Although the planners were provided access to the full range of US intelligence resources, certain characteristics of North Vietnam created severe limits on what types of information were actually available. The closed nature of the North Vietnamese society made human intelligence (HUMINT) of any kind very difficult to obtain. Limited communications infrastructure and excellent communications security discipline on the part of the North Vietnamese eliminated signals intelligence (SIGINT) as a source. The Son Tay planners were told that “they would be almost totally dependent on photographic reconnaissance for the intelligence so vital to the success of the raid.”<sup>12</sup> In an effort to maximize effectiveness, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) formed a dedicated team of experts to analyze photos of Son Tay being produced by satellite reconnaissance, SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft, “Buffalo Hunter” low-altitude drones, and RF-4 aircraft missions. Southeast Asian weather further hampered intelligence collection—frequent cloud cover and the need to minimize low-altitude Buffalo Hunter overflights at Son Tay conspired to block intelligence. Early summer photos showed prisoners standing within the Son Tay compound; by August 1970, however, interpreters had noticed a decrease in the level of activity at Son Tay.<sup>13</sup> Efforts to get more Buffalo Hunter photos proved fruitless; of eight missions launched, six succumbed to maintenance failure or anti-aircraft fire, and the last two failed to image the target. The final mission drone began a planned turn directly over the Son Tay camp—and took a perfect photograph of the sky.<sup>14</sup>

As raid launch time approached, the CIA inserted an agent in the vicinity of Son Tay, but nothing was discovered.<sup>15</sup> Two days prior to execution, a final source of intelligence surfaced in the guise of a mid-level North Vietnamese bureaucrat in the ministry charged with POW affairs. Although this individual had been working with the United States for more than a year, the CIA did not admit his existence to the Son Tay planners or query him until it became apparent that no further Buffalo Hunter imagery could be produced. Once queried, this “usually reliable foreign intelligence source in the field” reported that no POWs were present at Son Tay, instead identifying a heretofore unknown camp at Dong Hoi.<sup>16</sup> This intelligence revelation created an immediate, time-critical crisis in the Son Tay execution decisionmaking process.

### ***The Political Backdrop***

“In World War II a mission such as the Son Tay raid could have been ordered by a division commander; but in Vietnam, operations weren’t that simple,” observed Richard Harris in an article for *American History Illustrated*. “Vietnam was a war of politics in which political expediency took priority over military necessity. The order for this mission had to come from President Nixon.”<sup>17</sup>

The Son Tay raid was planned and executed at a time when the United States was intent on negotiating a conclusion to American involvement in the war. Substantial ground combat forces had already been withdrawn from the south as the process of “Vietnamization” went forward. The sole remaining obstacle to concluding this chapter of history was to gain return of the 1,463 POWs and MIAs in Southeast Asia.

Beyond the goal of freeing POWs, the United States also sought to increase its clout at the ongoing Paris Peace Talks and perhaps force North Vietnamese concessions.<sup>18</sup> “The administration saw the raid as a way of indicating that the United States could inflict punishment, even without resuming bombing of the North, if North Vietnam did not become more flexible at the stalemated peace talks.”<sup>19</sup> In counterpoise was the domestic political imperative to avoid the impression that this raid represented a widening of the war,<sup>20</sup> especially given that since July 1968 there had been a two-year bombing pause over North Vietnam.<sup>21</sup>

The cast of decisionmakers for the Son Tay raid was very small due to the sensitive nature of the mission. Brigadier General Donald Blackburn (USA), who held the post of Special Assistant for Counter-Insurgency and Special Activities on the Joint Staff, approved the preliminary raid planning. He in turn sought approval from Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After unit training was under way, General Blackburn and Admiral Moorer briefed and gained approval from Secretary of Defense Laird,

who first introduced President Richard Nixon to the raid concept in late September 1970. Nixon accepted the plan “in principle” but asked that National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger be briefed on the mission.

Until this point, all intelligence decisions related to mission execution were based on overhead imagery, which had been sporadic due to cloud cover over North Vietnam. On 8 October 1970, planners met with Kissinger. Their briefing was well received, but they were told that mission approval would be delayed for at least several weeks due to “ongoing political discussions,” which later proved to be the first overtures toward China by the Nixon Administration.<sup>22</sup>

Dr. Kissinger was greatly impressed with the thoroughness of the planning but feared that an unsuccessful mission might create more POWs.<sup>23</sup> When Kissinger asked General Blackburn about the odds of success, Blackburn replied that he could give a “95 to 97 percent assurance of success.”<sup>24</sup> At the time of the 8 October briefing, new SR-71 imagery of Son Tay revealed very little camp activity and no sign of POWs. Although the raiding force was mission-ready by 7 October, execution was now on hold as the final political and intelligence drama played out in Washington.<sup>25</sup>

### *Down to the Wire*

On 12 November 1970, strike force personnel began to deploy to Thailand. That same day, Secretary of Defense Laird received provisional approval from President Nixon for mission execution, with a final “go” order to follow. The next day, word arrived via peace activist intermediaries that six POWs had died while in captivity in North Vietnam, adding further urgency to the decision process.<sup>26</sup> Five days later, on 18 November, Admiral Moorer met with President Nixon, Dr. Kissinger, Secretary of State William Rogers, and Secretary Laird, seeking final mission approval.<sup>27</sup> The President was very impressed with the quality of the presentation and “lapped it up like an eight-year-old at his first cowboy movie.”<sup>28</sup> “When [Admiral Moorer] mentioned that the mission would be canceled if there was any sign that the enemy was aware of the objective, Nixon protested: ‘Damn, Tom, let’s not let *that* happen. I want this thing to *go*.’”<sup>29</sup> The lack of activity at the Son Tay camp was not revealed at this meeting—the President authorized transmission of the “execute” message later that afternoon.<sup>30</sup>

On 19 November, after the President approved the mission and one day before actual launch, word reached General Blackburn of the North Vietnamese HUMINT source who reported “no prisoners at Son Tay.” This HUMINT report triggered a massive reanalysis of available information and demands for an updated intelligence estimate.

For the next 12 hours, General Blackburn, DIA Director Lieutenant General Donald Bennett, Admiral Moorer, and Secretary Laird struggled with the significance of this news and what impact it should have on the mission. General Blackburn was certain that the mission should proceed; yet his confidence wavered as he expressed great frustration with the quality of the intelligence analysis. “One minute they were ‘sure’ the prisoners were gone, the next they were ‘suspicious’ that POWs had been moved back into Son Tay.”<sup>31</sup> General Bennett appeared before Admiral Moorer on the morning of 20 November with two stacks of “evidence,” one saying “they’ve moved,” and an equally large one saying “they’re still there.”<sup>32</sup> Despite this muddled intelligence picture, General Bennett eventually recommended that the mission proceed, primarily on the basis of the “95 percent assurance” that the raiders could safely complete their mission.<sup>33</sup> Armed with the concurrence of his three subordinates, Secretary of Defense Laird routinely notified the President that the mission would proceed as planned. The White House concurred with the Pentagon’s intentions. With the raid due to launch in hours, the Administration was not interested in doubts. As Admiral Harry D. Train, at that time the Executive Assistant to Admiral Moorer, later put it, “They didn’t want to know.”<sup>34</sup>

### ***Groupthink at the Pentagon***

The Son Tay mission “go” decision provides a rich lesson in group decision dynamics and political maneuvering. The White House and Pentagon both fell victim to “groupthink” as they struggled to arrive at a mission launch decision. Unknown to each other, each group weighed different criteria for mission launch, and each group defined ultimate mission success differently.

Author Irving Janis first described groupthink in 1971 as part of his ground-breaking study of the Kennedy Administration’s conduct of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion. Groupthink happens when individuals allow a desire for solidarity and unanimity within a group to override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.<sup>35</sup> Groupthink has been repeatedly cited as a contributor to calamity, most recently in the NASA *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters.

In the face of a confused and deteriorating intelligence picture, Secretary of Defense Laird recommended a mission “go” to the White House. This recommendation came despite the fact that “the US military had not conducted a successful POW rescue since the Civil War. The experience in Southeast Asia had been particularly bleak. Between 1966 and 1970, US forces had mounted forty-five raids in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam to rescue American POWs and had freed one. He died shortly after [rescue] of injuries his captors inflicted moments before he was rescued.”<sup>36</sup>

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The Son Tay raiders executed their mission perfectly, yet disaster lurked close at hand. Had the lucky mistake of assaulting the Secondary School not intervened, the raiders would likely have met considerably more effective enemy resistance and less tactical success. Janis’s description of groupthink played a classic role in Pentagon decisionmaking:<sup>37</sup>

- *Illusion of Invulnerability*: “Everything is going to work out all right because we are a special group.” In an era of McNamarian statistics, the “95 to 97 percent assurance of success” placed an exact (albeit contrived) value on the Son Tay raiders’ invulnerability.

- *Belief in the Inherent Morality of the Group*: “Under the sway of groupthink, members automatically assume the rightness of their cause.” The “rightness” of rescuing American POWs was unassailable. In the final presidential approval briefing of 18 November 1970, President Nixon asked, “How could anyone *not* approve this?”<sup>38</sup>

- *Collective Rationalization*: “A mindset of hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.”<sup>39</sup> At a critical 20 November 1970 meeting, General Blackburn, General Bennett, and Admiral Moorer met to consider the latest intelligence and decide the fate of the mission. General Blackburn, as the mission’s sponsor and planner, was determined that the mission should “go” despite the intelligence, but he feared that General Bennett, the head of DIA, would veto the mission. The late Benjamin Schemmer, the preeminent Son Tay historian, related the exchange: “Moorer asked [Bennett] what do you recommend? ‘I recommend we go,’ Bennett said. Blackburn tried not to reveal his relief. ‘Bennett had the death warrant in his hand,’ [General Blackburn] said later. ‘I thought, damn, the whole thing is going to collapse. I wanted to go.’”<sup>40</sup> Once General Bennett had agreed to overlook the unfavorable intelligence, the groupthink path was clear.

- *Out-group Stereotypes*: The inputs of individuals outside the group are not valued if they do not conform to the group’s view. Although mission planners had repeatedly lamented the lack of HUMINT and the overreliance on technical means, when the HUMINT contradicted their desire to “go,” the HUMINT was ignored. Twenty-six years later, in a 1996 interview, former

Secretary of Defense Laird said that when presented with the information from the Hanoi HUMINT source, he did not judge it to be accurate or believable.<sup>41</sup>

- *Self-Censorship*: Individuals with dissenting views remain silent, driven by a desire to remain a “team player” or a fear of losing influence. In a 1993 book, Admiral Train admitted: “Twelve hours before the raid we had fairly high confidence that [Son Tay] was empty. The photography showed the grass had not been walked on in ten days. On the basis of the photographic evidence alone we knew that it was empty.”<sup>42</sup> Despite being personally confident that the camp was empty, a four-star flag officer remained either silent or chose not to forcefully argue his case.

- *Illusion of Unanimity*: “Perpetuating the fiction that everyone is in full accord. Silence is interpreted as agreement.”<sup>43</sup> This aspect of groupthink is difficult to detect in this case since all principle decisionmakers believed that executing the raid was the correct choice. Had the mission ended in catastrophe, the cast of doubters and second-guessers would probably be much larger.

- *Direct Pressure on Dissenters*: When faced with the unwanted report that the camp was empty, General Blackburn asked his DIA intelligence team: “How in the hell they could make heads or tails of the data? He was flabbergasted by their interpretation. One minute they were sure the prisoners were gone, the next they were suspicious they had moved back into Son Tay.”<sup>44</sup> This caustic reaction was prompted by intelligence that did not fit the desired picture. The implied message to the “dissenters” was, “I will stop yelling at you when you tell me what I want to hear.”

- *Self-Appointed Mindguards*: “Mindguards protect a leader from assault by troublesome ideas.”<sup>45</sup> The Pentagon advocates of the Son Tay mission went to considerable effort to insulate the White House from unwanted details. In his *White House Years* memoir, Henry Kissinger relates: “We knew the risk of casualties, but none of the briefings that led to the decision to proceed had ever mentioned the possibility that the camp might be empty.”<sup>46</sup> Although Secretary of Defense Laird provided regular updates to President Nixon concerning a decrease in camp activity, he chose not to make him aware of the HUMINT source. “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. At this point, apparently the execution of policy was more important than ‘cluttering’ the decision with new information, regardless of its potential impact.”<sup>47</sup>

### ***Groupthink at the White House***

The small circle of Nixon advisors that played a Son Tay decision-making role also fell victim to groupthink. Presidents can act only on the information they are provided; thus groupthink is a constant hazard. In *Ending*

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*the Vietnam War*, Henry Kissinger pens a *mea culpa* for his role in the Son Tay raid decision: “A President, and even more his National Security Adviser, must take nothing on faith; they must question every assumption and probe every fact. Not everything that is plausible is true, for those who put forward plans for action have a psychological disposition to marshal the facts that support their position.”<sup>48</sup>

Although there is documentary evidence that four different Nixon Administration officials heard the mission concept brief (Nixon, Kissinger, Secretary Rogers, and Deputy National Security Advisor Major General Alexander Haig), it appears that only Nixon and Kissinger participated in the final deliberations with Secretary of Defense Laird.<sup>49</sup> The exact role played by Henry Kissinger and how much information he received is called into question in Kissinger’s book, *White House Years*: “After the failure of the raid I was informed of a message sent in code by a prisoner of war that the camp was ‘closed’ on July 14. This was interpreted by military analysts to mean that the gates were locked; it had not been considered of sufficient importance to bring to the attention of the White House.”<sup>50</sup> Kissinger’s recollection is not consistent with that of other participants. Either by a conscious decision of the President, or an inability to accurately recall events, Kissinger does not seem to have been intimately involved in the final Son Tay decision. Thus, the White House decision “group” was comprised of President Nixon and Secretary of Defense Laird.

Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig had all been present when the magical “95 percent assurance of success” line was uttered, buttressing the group’s view of its invulnerability. The President was especially certain of the inherent morality of the mission. In addition to the POW rescue aspect, Nixon saw the raid as a chance to “boost his approval rating and gain public support for the war.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the risks, the mission offered President Nixon a chance to strike back against his domestic “enemies.”

The White House was overrun with self-appointed mindguards. On the morning of 18 November 1970, after President Nixon had received his

final Son Tay raid briefing, Major General Haig asked Admiral Moorer: “If this thing fails, maybe we could find a way to let the Old Man off the hook? He’s taken nothing but bum raps on every decision he’s made about Vietnam. We can’t let him down on this one. You know what I mean?”<sup>52</sup> Haig’s intent was to shield Nixon from the consequences of his decision. Secretary Laird’s selective reporting of intelligence cast him as the Administration’s chief mindguard. Even though Laird and his staff struggled with the significance of the HUMINT information for more than 24 hours, and nearly canceled the mission as a result, Laird did not notify the President of the existence of this latest “troublesome” information.

### ***Same Mission, Different Goals***

The most stunning aspect of the Son Tay raid is the wide and subtle goal divergence that existed between the Pentagon and the White House. In the minds of the Pentagon military planners, the Son Tay raid was a high-risk tactical mission undertaken to rescue American POWs being held captive under harsh conditions in North Vietnam. Colonel Simons summed this viewpoint in his pre-mission speech to the raiders: “We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners of war, maybe more, at a camp called Son Tay. This is something that American prisoners have a right to expect from their fellow soldiers.”<sup>53</sup> To the Pentagon planners, conflicting intelligence in the eleventh hour threatened the sole objective of the raid. No POWs, no raid.

President Nixon’s motives were far more complex and closely guarded. Although Nixon also sought to rescue POWs, the Son Tay raid provided an ideal vehicle to forward his emerging strategy of imposing pressure on the North Vietnamese and convincing them that the Administration was not to be trifled with. According to historian Jeffrey Kimball:

In his memoirs, Kissinger revealed the broader diplomatic and strategic reasons behind the November 1970 [Son Tay] air raids. Besides diverting North Vietnamese defenses from Son Tay, they were designed to retaliate for the abrupt rejection of our peace proposal; and to slow down the North Vietnamese dry-season supply effort in the South. Thus, besides its humanitarian and political purposes, the combined operation of rescue and bombing had military and psychological purposes—an adjective Nixon used in his memoirs. [Nixon] commented that “it revealed [to the North Vietnamese] their vulnerability to a kind of attack they had not experienced before. The rescue mission demonstrated that the US could get past North Vietnamese air defenses and operate in [their] rear. It was a true [rescue] activity but also designed to show” that Nixon’s threats should be taken seriously.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike those at the Pentagon who viewed the Son Tay raid as a POW rescue, President Nixon saw it as a combination of a rescue, a threat to the

North Vietnamese, and a salvo against his domestic critics. At least one modern scholar has gone so far as to ask the question: “Was Son Tay a rescue mission or an attack on North Vietnam disguised as a rescue mission?”<sup>55</sup>

Numerous Pentagon officials expressed surprise at the White House’s indifference to the reports of decreased camp activity. Their concerns might have been far more muted had they understood the fundamentally different objectives of the White House and the Pentagon. Whereas the military’s launch decision hinged solely on rescuing POWs, the White House saw great opportunity in safely executing a raid into North Vietnam, even if no POWs were rescued. Those in the Pentagon believed they were recommending “go” on a *tactical* mission. The White House had long since approved a *strategic* mission.

### ***Intelligence Failure***

“Intelligence failure” is an overused phrase in military history, yet it certainly applies in this case. While the vast US intelligence apparatus was able to marshal a multitude of facts to prepare the raiders for their mission, in the end they were unable to accurately provide the one fact upon which everything else hinged—whether or not there were any prisoners at Son Tay. Barely second in magnitude to this most fundamental oversight was the inexplicable failure to detect a large military force 400 meters from the objective at the Secondary School—only good fortune in the form of a misdirected landing force and flawless tactical execution on the part of the raiders overcame this threat to the mission. The Son Tay raiders themselves praised the quality of the intelligence product they received, yet it is worth asking what the outcome might have been if the intelligence had been able to retarget this raiding team in July 1970 to some other camp—one that was occupied.

A junior partner to the failure of intelligence is the incredible level of compartmentalization within the war effort and the lack of measures to avoid working toward conflicting ends. The Son Tay mission was wholly dependent on high-quality targeting to ensure the presence of prisoners. Although the CIA had been cultivating a human source in North Vietnam for more than a year, the question of POW locations was not posed to him until September 1970, and then only after it had become apparent that imagery alone would not suffice to confirm the status of Son Tay. Had the CIA been more forthcoming with its resources, an eleventh-hour decisionmaking crisis might have been averted.

Finally, a classic case of Clausewitzian friction and unforeseen consequences came into play. From 1967 to 1972, the CIA conducted cloud seeding activities throughout Laos in an effort to trigger flooding in agrarian North Vietnam. Although the effectiveness of the cloud seeding effort is im-

possible to prove, rainfall in Laos and North Vietnam in 1970 was approximately five times greater than normal.<sup>56</sup> Flooding on the Son Tay River and its threat to the prison camp wall was the reason that the POWs were evacuated by the North Vietnamese in July 1970,<sup>57</sup> approximately four months before the raid, possibly meaning that the CIA had an unintended hand in the demise of the mission.

The Son Tay raid became many things to many people. To the vast majority of the world audience, the raid was seen as a strategic failure that did not rescue any POWs. However, in the political and diplomatic world of President Nixon, Dr. Kissinger, and their North Vietnamese adversaries, Son Tay opened a new chapter of presidential policy and aggressiveness as the Nixon Administration sought to force the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table and hasten the American chapter of the Vietnam story to a close.

From a tactical perspective, the Son Tay raid was a model for planning and execution. The greatest achievement of the raid was never considered a mission objective—although no POWs were rescued, the raid forced the North Vietnamese to consolidate all POW camps, in some cases ending years of isolation for POWs and raising morale immensely.<sup>58</sup> Despite this unforeseen benefit, the fact remains that two more years would pass before the POWs were released.

Failure invites intense scrutiny. The casualty-free execution of the Son Tay mission has deprived groupthink scholars of a treasury of lessons that apparently have gone unnoticed, buried beneath the “intelligence failure.” The Pentagon’s Son Tay “go” decision was a classic episode of groupthink, made possible primarily by one officer’s blithe assurance that this mission had a 95- to 97-percent probability of success. Had it not been for the lucky mistake that lent tactical surprise to the raiders at the Secondary School, Son Tay might rank much higher in groupthink catastrophe scholarship.

Arguing a case in hindsight is always easier. In the end, however, a sound argument can be made that with better intelligence, less compartmentalization, a more serious consideration of alternatives, and, most important, less groupthink, the Son Tay raid might have met with great success rescheduled as the Dong Hoi raid of February 1971.

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