

Officials: POWs left behind

Former defense secretaries believe Americans were left in Laos

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WASHINGTON — Two of Richard Nixon's Pentagon chiefs told a congressional panel Monday that the government believed American airmen were left alive in Laos and not returned at the end of the Vietnam War.

Separate testimony by Melvin R. Laird and James R. Schlesinger, both of whom served as President Nixon's secretary of defense two decades ago, supported conclusions by leaders of the Senate investigating committee that not all Americans came home at the war's end.

"I think it's quite extraordinary when two former secretaries of defense both give evidence documenting that they had information, or they believed personally, that people were alive and not accounted for in Operation Homecoming," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., chairman of the Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs, said.

"They have acknowledged publicly that there was evidence people did not come back who should have, that they were held prisoner to the best of our knowledge," Kerry said.

Laird and Schlesinger appeared as the panel began the first ever under-oath, public questioning of the highest ranking officials of the Nixon administration about their efforts to win release of American POWs as they negotiated an end to the long, bitter war in Southeast Asia.

Henry A. Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser and secretary of state who conducted the negotiations with the North Vietnamese, is scheduled to undergo questioning today.

Laird, a former Wisconsin congressman, was Nixon's defense secretary for four years of the fighting, from 1969 to 1973, when he moved to the White House as presidential adviser to help Nixon battle the growing Watergate scandal. Schlesinger was Nixon's director of Central Intelligence and became secretary of defense in 1973.

Both testified that downed American airmen were contacted on the ground in Laos by U.S. forces in numbers greater than were ever accounted for. During the peace negotiations with North Vietnam, U.S. officials there drew a list of only 12 prisoners in

Laos.

"It is evident that the Laotians gave no true accounting of the Americans who had been taken in Laos," Schlesinger said.

Asked directly if the United States left men behind, Schlesinger said: "As of now, I can come to no other conclusion. That does not mean that there are any alive today."

Schlesinger speculated that some may have been executed. Kerry said others may have been killed in combat on the ground or died of exposure in the jungle.

Laird testified that the Pentagon had solid information, such as letters, eyewitness reports or direct radio contact, on about 20 American airmen who survived downings in Laos. Laird said he notified Nixon of these estimates in late 1972. Only 10 were released the next year.

Laird did not say how many prisoners he believed were never accounted for, but said he was disappointed by the short list provided through the North Vietnamese.

Documents released by Sen. Bob Smith, R-N.H., vice chairman of the committee, show that as many as 350 U.S. personnel were missing or captured in Laos.

Nixon, in a televised address to the nation on March 29, 1973, declared that as a result of the Paris peace accords with North Vietnam, "All of our American POWs are on their way home."

Committee members have asserted that evidence shows that statement was false, and that its acceptance as fact severely damaged subsequent efforts to unearth the truth about missing Americans.

Laird, questioned about Nixon's statement, said he was no longer defense secretary at that time and had no input into the statement. But he said he regretted Nixon made it.

"I think it was unfortunate to be that positive," he said. "You can't be that positive with the kind of intelligence we had when I left."

The issue of prisoners in Laos was complicated because the CIA was directing a secret war against communist insurgents there, and it was never clear whether negotiations with the North Vietnamese on POWs would lead to the release of Americans held