

TV Informed Him of Bombing,

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Air Force Secretary Robert C. Seamans Jr. says that he learned of the recent bombing offensives against North Vietnam while watching television.

"I am not in the operational chain of command," Seamans explained in an interview. "I'm not authorizing any bombing. My job is one of men and materials."

"Where the bombing occurs is really not my decision," Seamans said. "From Christmas to New Year's I was on vacation in New England. The first thing I knew about the December raids was when I heard it on the Today Show."

Three in Chain

The Air Force says that only five men, three of them military officers, are in the regular operational chain of command that selects bombing targets in Indochina: President Nixon, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird; Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Adm. John S. McCain, commander of Pacific forces; and Gen. Creighton Abrams, U.S. field commander in Vietnam.

But there is evidence that more people have been in on past decisions on the bombing. The Pentagon Papers, for instance, showed wide government participation in the selection of bombing targets during the Johnson administration—especially if hitting them threatened to escalate the Vietnam war.

At a news conference Dec. 16, Seamans displayed a series of charts to show that the trend of the air war "is definitely downward." But then in five days of raids beginning Dec. 26, the Nixon administration unleashed 1,000 bombing sorties against North Vietnam, the most intensive since President Nixon took office. A sor-

tie is one plane flying one mission.

A former Pentagon executive of Seamans' rank, who declined to be identified, was asked about Seamans' statement that he had not been consulted about the raids.

Would Feel Teed Off

"If I were Seamans and that happened to me," he said, "I would be highly teed off."

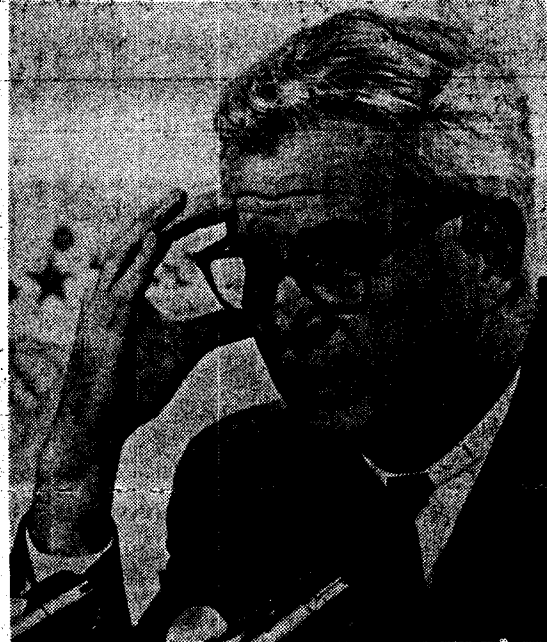
"Technically, they can say he is not in the chain. But the Secretary who supplies the planes and men ought to have a say in what they're going to be used for."

"It would not have happened to Harold Brown," former Secretary of the Air Force. "It's another example of how tightly these things are held."

Seamans, 53 is frequently challenged by college students and others on U.S. bombing policy in Indo China. He came to government from the campus and still serves on Harvard's University's Board of Overseers.

While stressing he is a supplier of material, not a selector of targets for the air war, Seamans said: "I wouldn't do that much if I felt a whole bombing campaign was wrong. Indiscriminate bombing of defenseless people would be immoral if we were doing it. But we're taking every possible precaution to minimize civilian casualties."

Asked what rebuttle he offered to critics who said bombing a relatively defenseless people is immoral, Seamans said: "War itself is immoral. I have to face life the way it is right at this moment. The North Vietnamese have been pulling stuff for a long, long time—abducting Meo tribesmen in Laos and assassinating people in South Vietnam. These are up to about 100 kill-



Associated Press

Secretary of the Air Force Robert C. Seamans Jr.

ings a week, with one-fourth of them individually targeted. I'd like to have the whole thing stopped. But none of the alternatives toward reaching that objective seem to be 100 per cent attractive."

Critics of bombing, including former Under Secretary of State George Ball, have argued that the dynamics of U.S. airwar strategy dictates steady escalation. That is, the more the U.S. bombs, the more Hanoi has to defend and then the more the U.S. has to bomb to blow Hanoi's defenses.

Seamans contended that bombing was still a vital necessity for Indochina, making these points during the inter-

view in his Pentagon office:

- General Abrams believes that "the one military force he has over there is air power. He wants and should use air power in a very flexible way."

- The U.S. Air Force has to "stem the flow" of Hanoi's war goods down the Ho Chi Minh trail to minimize the risks of withdrawing American troops from Vietnam.

- The Laotian government, whose forces are under attack in Northern Laos, has "asked for all the support we can give them."

- Part of Hanoi's grand strategy for Laos may be to draw as much U.S. air power as possible away from the Ho Chi Minh trail and toward the

AF Chief Says

less vital grounds of Northern Laos.

The U.S. Air Force campaign in the far north of Laos is code named Barrel Roll and the one in the panhandle of Southern Laos—the place where the network of roads called the Ho Chi Minh trail threads through—is called Steel Tiger.

Precaution Overlooked

Seamans said that the public does not appreciate the care taken in the Barrel Roll bombing nor the fact that the Ho Chi Minh trail is not a populated area. He said he had visited Northern Laos.

"I have seen no evidence of indiscriminate bombing," the Air Force Secretary said. "Those who have been up there fall in love with the people. The travesty of justice occurs when the North Vietnamese get in there. They are rough. I have seen no indication that the population up there is against the United States. Just the opposite."

As for B-52 strikes in Northern Laos, Seamans said that they "have not been targeted near populated areas."

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) has charged that U.S. bombing in Northern Laos has made thousands of people there homeless.

Possible Strategy

Seamans said it was a possibility that one objective of the North Vietnamese push in Northern Laos is to draw off American warplanes from the supply routes farther south, which show many signs of intense activity. Besides keeping 30,000 of the usual 50,000 work force on the Ho Chi Minh trail during the rainy season, instead of sending them home as in the past, Seamans said, Hanoi is also setting up several surface-to-air missile installations along its war sup-

ply routes. Hanoi is believed to have about five SAM units in Laos at this time.

Because of the sensitivity of the Laotian government on the subject, the Pentagon has not disclosed how many warplane sorties are flown against targets in Northern Laos and how many in the panhandle. But Seamans said "over two-thirds" of the bombs dropped in Laos fall on the trail.

C-130 Effective

One of the most effective weapons against truck traffic on the supply roads through Laos has been the C-130 gunship. It uses night vision devices and other aids plus heavy fire power, including Gatling-type machine guns. The Air Force's latest figures estimate that of the 7,200 tons of war goods Hanoi started down the trail from Nov. 1, 1971 through Dec. 28, 1971, only 80 tons got through.

"My overall objective is to phase our Air Force down," Seamans said. "I want to minimize our involvement out there, but we need the flexibility of air power" in the meantime.

Bulk over Laos

Right now, the Air Force secretary added, 90 per cent of the air war in South Vietnam is being conducted by the South Vietnamese. They are also flying "over 50 per cent" of the missions in Cambodia. This means that the bulk of the U.S. effort in the air is over Laos.

Asked if he felt that the Vietnam war had been worth the lives and money spent on it, Seamans—at 53 a former Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professor and deputy administrator of the civilian space agency—paused briefly and then replied: "I'm glad I'm on the team that is drawing everything down."