

SENTINEL BACKED BY LAIRD AS VITAL TO THWART SOVIET

He Suggests Moscow Seeks
Capability to Destroy U.S.
With Surprise Attack

SENATE HEARINGS OPEN

Secretary Discloses Secret
Data to Bolster View of
Russian Missile Threat

Excerpts from missile hearing
are printed on Page 20.

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 20—

The Defense Department opened a televised counter-offensive against opponents of the Sentinel today by asserting that a missile defense was necessary to prevent the Soviet Union from acquiring the ability to destroy the United States with a surprise nuclear attack.

In a day-long appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird issued previously secret intelligence information to paint a foreboding picture of the Soviet nuclear threat. It was a picture far grimmer than the assessment offered two months ago by his predecessor, Clark M. Clifford.

In more specific terms than Mr. Clifford used, the Secretary suggested that the Soviet Union was intent on achieving a first-strike capability against the United States—the ability to make an attack so destructive that this country would not be able to retaliate. Such a development would upset the balance in nuclear deterrence of the last decade.

Notes Russian Gains

Mr. Laird recounted how the Soviet Union was deploying a large intercontinental missile with a 25-megaton warhead,

hinted that the Soviet Union might already be orbiting space weapons equipped with nuclear warheads, and noted that it was deploying missile-equipped atomic submarines at a rapid rate.

On the basis of these Soviet developments, Mr. Laird predicted that the Soviet Union would acquire a first-strike capability by the mid-nineteen-seventies if the United States did not take steps now to protect its Minuteman missile bas with an antimissile system.

To highlight his case, Mr. Laird at times used previously secret intelligence information, such as the expected accuracy of Soviet missiles, the rate at which the Soviet Union was turning out missile submarines, and how the United States had detected the firing of an improved antimissile system at a Soviet test center.

The result of the detailed testimony was to impress members of the committee, who are normally hesitant to discuss such military information in open session.

"The American people have never heard anything like this

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before," the chairman, Senator Stennis, Democrat of Mississippi, observed after the hearing. "The people of America know more tonight about the kind of world we're living in."

In reorienting the Sentinel antimissile system first ordered by President Johnson in September, 1967, the Administration has redirected what President Nixon calls the "Safeguard" system so as to provide protection of Minutemen bases. The system has now been officially renamed Safeguard.

Under the "phased deployment" plan authorized by the Nixon Administration, two Minutemen bases will have Safeguard protection by 1974—one at Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota, the other at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana.

The plan, however, without setting any date, contains an option to extend antimissile protection to two other Minuteman bases if the Soviet missile threat continues to increase.

In reorienting the \$6-billion Sentinel system, the Administration advanced the argument that steps were necessary to protect the nation's strategic deterrent force. Mr. Laird carried that argument a step further today by emphasizing the

threat presented by the build-up of Soviet offensive strategic forces.

With the Laird testimony, the long-simmering battle between the Armed Services Committee and the Foreign Relations Committee, over the antimissile issue in particular and military policy in general, was publicly joined.

The Foreign Relations Committee won the first round by forcing the normally secretive Armed Services Committee into an open, televised hearing. But in doing so, the Foreign Relations Committee permitted the Defense Department to get in the first blow before a sympathetic forum, thus putting the opposition in the Senate even more on the defensive.

The Foreign Relations Disarmament Subcommittee, which represents the hard core of the antimissile opposition, will hold a televised hearing tomorrow with Mr. Laird once again the witness.

That the hearing today was directed as a retaliatory blow against the opposition became evident from the opening statements of Senator John Stennis, Democrat of Mississippi, the committee chairman. It became increasingly obvious as Mr. Laird, in a 25-minute opening statement, con-

centrated on rebuttals to the arguments raised by the opposition.

Backed up by David Packard, the Deputy Defense Secretary; Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Dr. John S. Foster, director of defense research and engineering, Mr. Laird offered basically the following two-edged argument:

1. The Safeguard system would be "a building block to peace" and would not escalate the arms race or represent a "stumbling block" to strategic arms control negotiations, as the opposition contends it would.
2. With its present offensive build-up, the Soviet Union is acquiring a capability to launch a destructive first strike. Without an antimissile system, therefore, a serious question would arise whether the United States could continue to deter a Soviet attack. The antimissile argument was thus becoming reminiscent of the one that raged in the Senate a decade ago over whether the United States was confronted with a "missile gap." Then the United States overestimated the Soviet missile capability and went into a large-scale missile program that, in

the opinion of some, led to the current Soviet build-up in offensive missiles.

The case of the opposition was more and more devolving into demonstrating, if it could, that the Defense Department was overestimating Soviet intentions and capabilities.

In this argument over the Soviet threat, there was a significant change in roles today. A decade ago Senator Stuart Symington, Democrat of Missouri, a member of both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, was the author of the "missile gap" phrase.

Today he was Mr. Laird's principal critic, attempting to demonstrate that the Defense Secretary was using information about Soviet developments that was either unfounded or had been known for several years and had already been considered in strategic planning.

Mr. Symington's questions produced the only confrontation for Mr. Laird before an otherwise sympathetic committee. The Senator succeeded in obtaining some modifications in past statements by Mr. Laird and other defense officials.

Thus, Mr. Laird acknowledged that the Soviet Union had not deployed a "third gen-

eration" antimissile system around Moscow, as he previously stated, but rather was only testing such an improved system.

Polaris Force Cited

The Secretary also acknowledged that the Soviet Union might not as yet have deployed a fractional orbit at bombardment system, or FOBS. But he then went on to say, "We cannot assume that the FOBS which have been launched or deployed do not carry nuclear warheads."

One critical question was why the United States should be concerned about the vulnerability of its 1,040-missile Minuteman force so long as it had a Polaris submarine force equipped with 656 missiles.

Mr. Laird acknowledged that "as of this time" the Polaris force has the capability of causing "great damage" to Soviet population centers.

But he said that, because of "new things that have taken place," he seriously questioned whether the Polaris fleet would remain "very free from attack" after 1972.

Underlying the Symington question was the thesis that the main thrust of the Soviet strategic program in the last several years has been to

achieve something approaching nuclear "parity" with the United States. Now that it is reaching this status, he contended, The Soviet Union has the option of entering into an understanding with the United States to limit the strategic arms race.

Held Near to Parity

Mr. Laird's counterargument was that the Soviet Union showed no signs of slowing its build-up of offensive forces with the apparent objective of acquiring a first strike capability.

Standing by a graph comparing United States and Soviet missile forces, Mr. Packard described how the Soviet Union had already achieved near-parity in land-based intercontinental missiles and how by 1971-1974 it should have parity in the number of submarine-based missiles.

The Soviet development that was particularly stressed by both Mr. Packard and Mr. Laird was recent deployment of SS-9, which they described as a large, accurate, intercontinental missile capable of carrying a 25-megaton warhead or four or five multiple warheads.

Noting that the SS-9 represented "a very dangerous weapon" for attacking Minuteman bases," Mr. Packard said that

Pentagon analysis led to "the conclusion that the Soviet Union has the capability to destroy essentially all of the Minutemen in hardened silos if they chose to do so."

Under questioning, Dr. Foster made it clear that he Pentagon was talking in terms of the Soviet Union's acquiring such a potential first-strike capability in the mid-nineteen-seventies.

Mr. Clifford, the previous Defense Secretary, in discussing in January the implications of the Soviet buildup, had said, "It is reasonable to conclude that, even if the Soviets attempt to match us in numbers of strategic missiles, we shall continue to have, as far into the future as we can now discern, a very substantial qualitative lead and a distinct superiority in the numbers of deliverable weapons and the over-all combat effectiveness of our strategic offensive forces."

Poseidon Missile Fired

CAPE KENNEDY, Fla., March 20 (UPI)—A Navy Poseidon missile, designed to be fired from a submerged submarine, was launched today from a pad here. It was the fourth success in five launchings for the missile.