

'1st-Strike' Peril Cited By Laird

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The Soviet Union is building nuclear blockbusters that threaten to knock out American missile sites unless they are defended, the new Pentagon team said yesterday.

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, in attempting to justify the Safeguard ABM (anti-ballistic missile) before a televised session of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the Russians seem to be headed toward a first-strike strategy.

The basis he gave for this assessment is the continued deployment of the SS-9, an ICBM with a 20-to-25-megaton warhead—much larger than anything the United States has on the line.

Details about the Soviet SS-9, including its warhead, had been classified by the Pentagon until yesterday.

If the Soviet Union is indeed building a first-strike force rather than strictly a retaliatory one, it would represent a change in the balance of terror between the two super-powers.

Former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara took comfort from the Soviet decision to put ICBMs underground—protecting them from a surprise attack so they could be fired in retaliation.

Before missiles went underground on both sides, many strategists feared one side might launch its ICBMs in a period of crisis for fear of being knocked out by a surprise strike.

Laird resurrected the specter of first strike by telling the Committee yesterday that "the Soviet Union today is building at a rapid rate the kinds of weapons which could be used to erode our essential deterrent force."

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Continuing in this vein, he said: "They are installing many SS-9 ICBMs—a large and accurate weapon. With improvements in accuracy and a continued increase in numbers, the Soviet missile force could gain real effectiveness against our Minuteman ICBM."

The SS-9 is not a new ICBM. It has even been paraded in Moscow. Defense officials in secret testimony in previous years described it as a big weapon for destroying cities or airfields rather than a precision weapon for knocking out hardened ICBM sites. They also testified that Russia seemed to be emphasizing the production of a smaller ICBM, the SS-11, comparable to our 1 megaton-plus Minuteman.

New intelligence, Laird said, not only shows no abandonment of the SS-9 but also no leveling off in Soviet ICBM production as predicted in past years.

The proper U.S. response to these Soviet developments in weaponry, he said, is to protect our ICBMs with the ABM system. Such a defense, he said, will make it unmistakably clear to the Soviet Union that a "substantial number" of our ICBMs would survive any attack "and then destroy the attacker as a modern society."

Packard Testifies

"We must rely on deterrence to insure that nuclear war doesn't start in the first place," Laird said. His deputy, David Packard, said protecting missile sites with the ABM system—and thus keeping their retaliatory power credible—would be "a stabilizing influence in the long term" in

the strategic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Packard said the revised ABM, called Safeguard to dis-

tinguish it from Sentinel, goes to the defense of a second strike capability. He said "I cannot believe" the Soviets would interpret it as building

toward any kind of first-strike force.

"It is not an escalation of the arms race," Laird told the Senators in the packed hear-

ing room. "It is not a stumbling block to arms limitation talks. Safeguard is a building block to peace."

He said the Johnson Administration's Sentinel system—which, like Safeguard, provided a thin defense of the whole United States—"could have been interpreted as a first step" toward a heavy city defense.

Location of Bases

This is because the Sentinel sites were close to cities and therefore missiles could have been added later to provide for a thick defense. Laird said the Safeguard system—with its bases farther out from the cities—could not be thickened in this way to provide a point defense.

With American cities unprotected against any all-out attack by sophisticated Soviet missiles, Laird and his allies argue that Russia holds our cities hostage and thus deters the United States from attacking first. Therefore, the argument goes, there is no need for Russia to build a new generation of missiles to make sure it can destroy American cities.

Laird and Packard were backed up by John S. Foster Jr., Pentagon research chief, and Army Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in their ABM appearance before the Armed Services Committee.

Challenge by Symington

Their reception on that hawkish committee was generally friendly. Today, when Laird is invited to discuss the ABM before the Disarmament Subcommittee of the dovish Senate Foreign Relations

Committee, the questioning may be more severe.

Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), a member of both committees, dug into the Nixon Administration's ABM arguments yesterday. He said deploying the ABM would be a "grave mistake" and challenged the necessity for it.

Symington laid down several challenges and requested comment on them:

• The third generation of the Soviet ABM is in the test stage—"at least another year" away from being installed anywhere.

Laird misunderstood the question. He said the Soviets have not deployed a third generation of ICBM but there was "very good evidence" it is being tested. He added that in the meantime the Soviets are going ahead with SS-9 deployment and could put "four or five" separate warheads in its nose. He said that last year intelligence leaders predicted the Soviets "would not go forward with this large missile deployment."

• "There is no evidence that the FOBS (fractional orbital bombardment system—a missile that would approach the United States in low altitude flight from the south rather than from the north) has been deployed" because of technical difficulties.

Laird, who in his prepared statement said the Russians are still "working hard" on FOBS, limited his response to saying that the United States could not afford to be complacent about the new weapon and its deployment. He saw it as a threat to bombers—sneaking through American defenses and catching the planes on the ground.



Associated Press

Laird, left, and Packard present Administration's ABM plan at Senate hearing.

• There is nothing new about the Soviet missile submarine threat since the United States has known since 1966 that a new boat was in the works. Symington added that since May, 1967, the United States knew it was a Polaris-type boat with 16 missiles. Intelligence findings in both September, 1966, and May, 1968, were that six of the boats could be produced every year. The rate could be increased to eight a year only "if a second shipyard is used."

Laird, in answering Symington, released some highly secret intelligence information. He said in previous estimates "we never could actually state with any certainty" that the Soviets had gone into mass production on Polaris-type subs. "We now have that evidence," he said, as well as evidence they are deploying

seven of the subs a year—though not near American shores. The submarine production rate, he said, is one a month.

• The United States has only fragmentary evidence, based on "very early construction work," that Russia may be aiming some of its ABM radars toward China—as President Nixon noted last week. It will probably be a year or more before we know whether those radars are for the Soviet ABM or for tracking space vehicles. There was no clear response to that comment.

• The Safeguard ABM—though justified because of "a possible emerging Chinese ICBM capability"—is not giving that threat top priority. The only approved ABM sites are to defend Minuteman missiles from Soviet attack.