

Schlesinger, Laird Differ On Vietnam

By Michael Getler

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Former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and the current Pentagon boss, James R. Schlesinger, appear to be at odds over the wisdom of sending American bombers back over Vietnam in the event that large-scale fighting erupts there again.

Laird, in a television interview on Tuesday, said he would not recommend the U.S. reinvolving itself in the war in any fashion, and that he believes Congress should and would reject any request by the White House for authority to resume bombing.

Schlesinger, in recent interviews, said he believed such a request to Congress from the President was "highly likely" under the circumstances of an all-out Communist offensive similar to the one launched in March, 1972.

But he has also said the reintroduction of U.S. airpower would not be automatic, although a decision would have to be made quickly because the United States could not wait to see if Saigon had already lost the war before committing airpower.

Though legally constrained from acting without congressional approval in Vietnam again, the administration has sought to at least sustain doubts in Hanoi's mind about what the United States would do with its airpower in the future in the hope that this would help persuade North Vietnam not to attack in force.

Laird, however, in the inter-

view on WTTG's "Panorama" show Tuesday, rejected the current Pentagon Logic. He is now finishing up his last two weeks as the President's top domestic adviser.

He said Congress would reject such proposals because members were told "properly and rightly" during his regime that "Vietnamization" was a program to give Saigon the time and equipment to fight its own battles and to end American involvement.

"Now if they don't have the will or the desire to protect their own in-country security, we should not do anything else. We have given them the tools. We continue to give them the military supplies and equipment that are needed and necessary for them to do the job. And I would not recommend to the Congress, and I'm sure the Congress would reject, the idea of reinserting Americans—whether it be on the ground or in the air—in Southeast Asia," Laird said.

"We should not get in a position where we assure that all of the various groups in Southeast Asia will not raise arms against one another, because that fighting in Laos has gone on for many years, in Cambodia, in North and South Vietnam it has gone on for many years, and I don't believe that the United States of America can ever insure that there will be no more fighting in that area," he said.

"I think we can insure the non-involvement of America," he added, "and I think the Vietnamization program was the vehicle by which we gave the South Vietnamese the capability to protect their own in-country security."

Laird is a former eight-term congressman from Wisconsin. He is regarded as perhaps the most politically savvy member of the President's advisory team and he has been portrayed in the past as occasionally and privately at odds with the administration over its Vietnam policy, especially on bombing campaigns carried out late in the war.