

U.S., W. Germany Debate F-104 Role

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A needle-nosed fighter plane is at the heart of the broadening North Atlantic Treaty Organization debate on "dual capability—the term President Johnson and West German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard will be tossing back and forth next week like a hot rivet.

The plane is the Lockheed F-104G Starfighter. It was designed as a hot fighter by Clarence ("Kelly") Johnson, who also designed the U-2 and A-11 spy planes.

Back in 1959, the West German Government decided to leap-frog over less sophisticated aircraft and buy a fighter-bomber version of the F-104. Complicated navigation and other equipment was installed in the Starfighter so it could perform the bombing role.

Some of the F-104s were assigned the intercopter role—that of intercepting and knocking down any invading enemy bombers. But the primary NATO role of the F-104G, West German military offi-

cial here stress, was to drop nuclear — not conventional bombs — on any invading forces.

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, according to West German leaders, has recommended that the F-104G be given the job of carrying iron bombs as well. This dual capability concept, in the eyes of U.S. officials, is nothing more than building versatility into an existing weapons system.

But despite all the U.S. disclaimers, many West Germans fear giving the F-104G dual capability is really a first step toward taking nuclear bombs away from them altogether.

Some of these fears stem from the nature of the Starfighter itself. First of all, it has no bomb bay. So iron bombs for use in a conventional war would have to be the fuselage or sling under the razor-thin wings. German military leaders claim this amounts to giving the airplane a job it is not designed to do.

Secondly, loading up the F-104G with iron bombs would slow it down, shorten its range and lessen its

maneuverability. This would increase its vulnerability to ground fire.

With nukes, the F-104G could dash to the target at tree-top level and drop a bomb that would not have to hit as close as an iron bomb to destroy the target. The low-level capability of the 1500 m.p.h. Starfighter is designed to help it escape detection by enemy radar.

Third, argue the Germans, the F-104G—costing about \$1.5 million—is too expensive an airplane to use in the conventional role. "If your own air war in Vietnam has proved anything," said one West German official here, "it has proved that these expensive planes can be downed easily by small arms fire."

If iron bombs are really what you want the German Air Force to carry for NATO, the West Germans further argue, then another airplane should get the job. They nominate a light attack plane designated as the Fiat G-91. Germany and Italy built it together.

To these technical points, many Germans add U.S. de-

sires to allay Russian fears about Germany's finger getting near the nuclear button. The result—as some German leaders add it up—portends a smaller nuclear role for them.

At the current defense ministers meeting in Rome, McNamara undoubtedly is attempting to reassure NATO colleagues that there is no non-proliferation master plan behind his suggestion to give the Starfighter dual capability.

He probably also is arguing that expensive U.S. fighters already perform both the nuclear and conventional roles and that it long has been NATO strategy to prepare for both types of warfare. Otherwise, the argument goes, purely nuclear bombers like the Starfighter might find themselves uselessly sitting on the ground if conventional war occurs.

This discussion in Rome over dual capability almost certainly will be continued here next week "at the summit" when President Johnson and Chancellor Erhard sit down to talk about NATO military problems.