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U.S. Denies Army Move In Mideast

SF Chronicle

Washington

The White House denied yesterday that the United States is either creating or planning a three-division expeditionary force to be dispatched to the Middle East.

"The United States is not creating any Middle East expeditionary force, is not creating three divisions to send to the Middle East," said White House press secretary Ron Nessen. "The United States has no plans to develop any Army divisions to send to the Middle East."

"We are not trying to slip through any semantic loopholes on this. This is a clear, firm, and hard answer."

The question of a U.S. military force for the Middle East was discussed Thursday night in a live telecast interview with President Ford by NBC correspondents John Chancellor and Tom Brokaw. 13 JAN

Chancellor alluded to a report in New Republic magazine that said the Army was putting together a Middle East force. And Chancellor also said the report had been confirmed for NBC by the Pentagon.

When the newsman asked Mr. Ford about the report during the interview the President said he would not discuss military contingency plans.

The subject came up following a discussion of the United States' reliance on Middle East oil and reference to a comment by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that the United States would not permit itself to be "strangled" by oil producers. Chancellor then said to the President:

"The New Republic this week has a story saying there are three American divisions being sent to the Middle East, or being prepared for the Middle East. We called the Pentagon and we got a confirmation on that, that one is air mobile, one is airborne, and one is armor. It is a little unclear whether this is a contingency plan because we don't know where we would put the divisions in the Middle East. Could you shed any light on that?"

Mr. Ford replied, "I don't

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think that I ought to talk about any particular military contingency plans, John. I think what I said concerning strangulation and Dr. Kissinger's comment is about as far as I ought to go."

Nessen noted that the President, in brushing aside any discussion of military contingency plans, had given more or less a standard official reply to questions on military plans.

He said the President did not flatly deny the report Chancellor mentioned because he had never heard of such plans. "He didn't hear about it," the press secre-

tary said, "because there aren't any."

Nessen said he spoke with Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, as well as the President, about the matter early yesterday and that Schlesinger had labeled the report "buncombe."

Nessen told reporters at the White House he talked with Chancellor after the Thursday evening telecast. He said Chancellor told him "a young man in the office" had called the Pentagon and spoken to a major about the report.

According to Nessen, Chancellor said the officer had not actually confirmed the report, but that he had

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had contacted the Pentagon for him had misunderstood what the Army officer said.

not denied it either. Chancellor later took exception to Nessen's recollection of the conversation.

Chancellor said he thought at the time that NBC had received confirmation of the report on a Mideast force and that he told Nessen, a former colleague at NBC, that he had a memorandum with the name of the officer who had confirmed the report.

Yesterday, however, Chancellor said he had found that the reporter who

"I try to do my own leg work," Chancellor told the Los Angeles Times. "But I have learned a lesson from this. It was a mistake on the part of NBC, and there is a certain amount of hell being raised around here today."

Chancellor said he was preparing a correction for his network news telecast to clear up the matter.

But he still disputed Nessen's version of their conversation which took place after the Presidential interview. He said Nessen's account, in effect, accused him of lying to the President on live television. "And," he added, "I don't like being accused of being stupid on top of everything else."

United Press