

NY Times  
Excerpts From Laird's News Conference on Bombing

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Following are excerpts from a news conference by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird in Washington yesterday, as recorded by The New York Times through the facilities of A.B.C. News:

Q. Mr. Secretary, can you tell us anything at all about what you're now calling limited-duration protective-reaction strikes in North Vietnam? It seems that we've renewed bombing the North.

A. There are strikes currently authorized on request from our commanders in Southeast Asia, recommendations made by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and approved by the President and myself. In Saigon, a statement was made covering these strikes, which are of limited duration, but I will have nothing further to add to the statement that was made in Saigon which has been made available to all of you at this time.

Q. Mr. Secretary, without getting into the specifics, have we reversed our policy set in 1968 of ceasing to bomb North Vietnam?

A. You will refer to the so-called understanding of 1968. I would like to stress at this time that quite recently cities have been shelled in the South; on Dec. 19 Saigon was shelled. There have been DMZ violations by the North Vietnamese, particularly the construction of an infiltration road through the DMZ.

There have been no substantive negotiations as promised in 1968. Fourth point, unarmed reconnaissance planes have been attacked. Also, in the month of December more U.S. planes of all types have been attacked by North Vietnam than in any month since I have been Secretary of Defense.

Now it is obvious that the enemy has been confused

since many of the public statements which they have made in the last 36 hours have been erroneous. I don't want to give him any information at this time which would endanger our pilots as they carry out these strikes to protect our diminishing forces in South Vietnam.

**'Are They a Dead Letter?'**

Q. Are you saying then that the understandings are a dead letter?

A. No, I'm saying that the understandings must be lived up to by both sides and the enemy has shown through the five acts that I have cited that they clearly have not lived by those understandings. These strikes, as was announced in Saigon, are of a limited duration and when they are terminated an announcement will be made there.

Q. They go beyond your previous definition of protective reaction, do they not?

A. No, they are primarily for the protection of American service personnel—the diminishing levels, we're down to below 160,000 Americans today in Vietnam. This is from the high troop ceiling of 549,500, when I assumed the responsibility in the Nixon Administration for the Defense Department. There has been a substantial decrease, but this substantial decrease has gone down to 160,000 and it is very important that we protect those Americans.

Q. Mr. Secretary, would you say though that these strikes are more in the category of attrition and interdiction rather than protection reaction? In other words, you're striking at supplies and so forth.

A. Well, I don't know what term you want to use. I don't believe you can always

get a nice short term to use. They have the primary emphasis of protecting the remaining forces of Americans that are in Vietnam today.

Q. Specifically, what is happening; there's a danger to the remaining forces. Why the increase in the amount—number of planes? What are they doing to prompt the new numbers?

A. Of course, we have had strikes since I have been Secretary of Defense that have been of a larger nature in a 24-hour period than in the last 24-hour period. I'm sure you're aware of that. The situation is such that the five violations which I have pointed out I think are certainly known to all of you as you've been covering this building during the past few months.

**'Clearly A Violation'**

Q. Mr. Secretary, that road through the DMZ you mentioned is. I think, a year or so old. Are you saying that it's being used for infiltration now?

A. Well, I'm not going to get into the road—even the construction of the road, the use of this road is clearly a violation of the understanding.

Q. Mr. Secretary, what does this air action do to the American prisoners in view of North Vietnam's warning that there would be no releases as long as North Vietnamese territory is violated?

A. We will continue to take those necessary military actions to protect the remaining forces in South Vietnam. Now as far as the failure of North Vietnam to live by the Geneva conventions, I have cited that on many occasions and they continue to violate the Geneva conventions in almost every provision.

This is the humanitarian issue, of course, as far as the P.O.W.'s are concerned, and

the Geneva conventions are very clear. There is an absolute violation of the Geneva conventions by the enemy.

Q. Mr. Secretary, you mentioned a while ago that there's been attack on more U.S. planes of all kinds in December than at any time since you've been Secretary of Defense.

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A. Yes, there is an increase in the number of attacks on our reconnaissance aircraft in the North.

Q. Well, sir, my question is, is there any feeling that we may have to slow down the pace of the Vietnamization effort or will we continue.

A. I'd like to stress that I'm in complete accord with the statement made by Secretary Rogers at his year-end press briefing on Tuesday of last week. The withdrawal program will continue.

**Shift by Foe Discerned**

Q. Mr. Secretary, in your opinion, as we move into 1972, does the other side have the capability to launch any significant offensives into any of the military regions of Vietnam?

A. I think the North Vietnamese have decided because of the increased security within Vietnam and the progress that has been made with all the military aspects of the Vietnamization program to concentrate its efforts in Laos and in Cambodia. And possibly in Military Region II. I think that between now and the time that the President goes to China there is a possibility of increased activity on the part of the North Vietnamese. This has been shown in the last few weeks not only in Laos but also in Cambodia. It was predicted by me on my return from Vietnam.

I think we can look for other high points as far as the enemy is concerned, and

# of North and Defense Department Activities in '71

sibly near the election period here in the United States. I think that this kind of an effort will be made by the North Vietnamese.

Now I am confident that the South Vietnamese can handle the situation in South Vietnam. That program of Vietnamization and turning over the military responsibility there is moving on schedule or ahead of schedule. I'm confident that we will have success with that program.

Q. Mr. Secretary, are you connecting those two events — the President's trip to China and the increased activity. In other words, you think they're trying to cast a shadow on that visit?

A. Well, I think that the reason for the activity in Laos and Cambodia is related to the increased security capabilities of the South Vietnamese in South Vietnam. And in order to mount any kind of military activity at this time, they have increased their efforts outside of Vietnam.

## If They Don't Get Message

Q. Mr. Secretary, are you saying in effect that if the North Vietnamese don't get the message that these bombings will continue, they won't remain of limited duration.

A. I'm not going to discuss future military operations. I don't believe that any useful purpose is served by a discussion of possible future military operations. But I would not rule out future military operations either.

Q. Mr. Secretary, you said between now and China, you would expect increased activity by the N.V.A.

A. Well, I believe that during this particular period during the next two months there may be — there is evidence that they have increased their activity. They have increased the activity in

Laos. The North Vietnamese have increased their activity in Cambodia and they quite possibly could increase their activity along the border and Military Region II. That was the context in which I made my remarks. This could take place during the months of January and February. We've already seen the indications of this increased activity in Cambodia and in Laos.

Q. You talk about the splendid success that you have had with the Vietnamization program in South Vietnam, which has forced the enemy to move into other spots which are not so difficult, like Cambodia and Laos. Is it conceivable that Cambodia may be the Achilles heel of the Vietnamization program?

A. The President has said that a conscious decision has been made by our Government regarding the kind of support we will give in Cambodia. That conscious decision which has been made was different than the decision made by the previous Administration as far as South Vietnam is concerned.

North Laos is a continuing problem as far as the military situation is concerned in that area. The North Vietnamese have a great capability. They have increased their troops in the northern Laos area. This is a military operation which is not conducted by the Department of Defense or is not the responsibility, of course, of the Secretary of Defense as the Vietnamization program is.

The decision as far as Cambodia is concerned, is one in which we are giving military assistance and went to the Congress, and our military assistance program was approved.

As far as direct participation by the United States, this is limited. There are no

advisers as such operating in Cambodia. We have the military-assistance delivery team. We have the program which is limited by Congressional action and also by decisions which have been approved by the President of the United States.

## Report on Air Activities

Q. Mr. Secretary, are you willing to release figures showing the level of U.S. air efforts in northern Laos and Cambodia?

A. Yes, we are working out such a report, in accordance with the requirements of the new Congressional legislation. That will be delivered to the Congress upon its return. I would point out, however, that, contrary to the impression that some have, we have substantially reduced the air activities in Southeast Asia. We have reduced the tactical air sorties to approximately 20 per cent of what they were in the last year of the previous Administration. We have reduced the B-52 sorties from a sortie rate which was running at 1,800 sorties a month to a sortie figure which is a thousand or below.

Q. If the South Vietnamese do not withstand an all-out North Vietnamese attack, will the North Vietnamese in effect be able to capture Saigon and all these cities?

A. The Vietnamization program gives the South Vietnamese the capability to defend their country and that program is moving forward on schedule in all areas. As the Secretary of State indicated as recently as Thursday—and I am in complete accord with him, I discussed this matter with him prior to his meeting with the press —our withdrawal program will go forward. Your question is, indeed, a very iffy question but I am confident

the situation which you outlined will not occur.

Q. What is the difference between your policy now, where 350 airplanes are reported to have been on a raid —and we've seen nothing, no statement from here as to how many planes that involved—what's the difference between your policy and [Robert S. McNamara's] policy on the punitive retaliatory actions of bombing the North. It's not clear in my mind — you mentioned the violations in the North and you implied that this was a retaliatory effort.

A. The major difference, of course, is that these are of limited duration, and the termination will be announced and then we will give you the complete information regarding the use of airpower during the last few days when the limited-duration strikes are terminated.

You can see that there's a great deal of confusion on the part of the enemy, since many of the public statements that they are making today, and made yesterday, are erroneous. I do not believe that it would serve the safety of the American pilots that are involved for us to go beyond this. But I can assure you that this information will be made available to you as soon as the limited-duration strikes are terminated.

Q. Mr. Secretary, is that a guarantee that you will tell us what the targets were, because that would be a new departure?

A. Well, the targets are military targets that are authorized to be hit at the present time.

Q. Mr. Secretary, in your opinion is there anything that the N.V.A. can do between now and February that would make the President's position more difficult when he arrives in Peking?

A. No.

\* See Neil Sheehan,  
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FILED COMMENT