

Things Stir in

By Michael Getler

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The blue and white Air Force jet waited at the Brussels airport last week for its VIP passenger to arrive—Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger.

Then, the wet-footed, red-eared bird watcher wrapped in tattered old corduroys and sweater boarded the plane.

The Pentagon's civilian boss has been unwinding from a two-day North Atlantic Treaty Organization meeting by spending his last hours in Belgium bird watching in the cold, coastal marshlands.

For Schlesinger, who took over the top Pentagon post in May, bird watching is an old hobby. But for military men, civilian bureaucrats, NATO ministers and Kremlin planners, Schlesinger-watching has become increasingly interesting and important.

As a Cabinet officer, the 44-year-old pipe-smoking defense intellectual, whose shirt tail is out more than it's in, seems to be living up to his billing as an unconventional bureaucrat.

During his short tour earlier this year as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Harvard-trained Ph.D. (in economics) went through the CIA's old-boy network with a broom—handed him by the White House—that swept about 1,000 people out of the agency's "tired bureaucracy."

Earlier, as head of the Atomic Energy Commission, he had taken his wife and two of their eight children to the Aleutian Islands to demonstrate that a big and controversial underground nuclear weapons test there was safe.

His presence in the Pentagon has caused things to stir there, too, though it isn't clear yet just how bold a Defense Secretary he plans to be.

Civilians in the vast Defense Department bureaucracy are worried about a

CIA-style purge falling on them.

The military is worried because Schlesinger, though generally hawkish, is unpredictable and knows more about strategy, technology and probably history than his civilian predecessors in the Pentagon's E-ring.

In Europe, he has succeeded rather quickly in at least gaining the attention and respect of the NATO defense ministers, who have lots of problems of their own.

Schlesinger believes strongly that a large U.S. military pull out from Europe would be a disaster for both American and European interests. In the context of an \$85 billion defense budget, he does not believe that a U.S. balance of payments deficit from overseas basing of perhaps \$1.5 billion currently estimated should dictate policy on such an important matter.

Yet, he has warned the Europeans—with logic and with some convenient help from Congress—that unless they "get serious" about improving their own defenses in a rational manner and stop exaggerating their own weaknesses and Communist-bloc strengths, the forces in this country demanding an American withdrawal will become irresistible.

Schlesinger has skillfully enlisted the aid of U.S. commanders in carrying to their European counterparts this previously painful message. He knows that for the U.S. Army, for example, Europe has always been the only place where the front lines seem real, with the Warsaw Pact forces just 80 miles across the Elbe River.

In Moscow, and indeed in Washington, the small but influential group of planners and critics who follow the arcane world of nuclear weapons and strategy are also paying close attention to the new Pentagon chief.

Schlesinger's career had been steeped in atomic strategy since he first

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Pentagon Under Unconventional

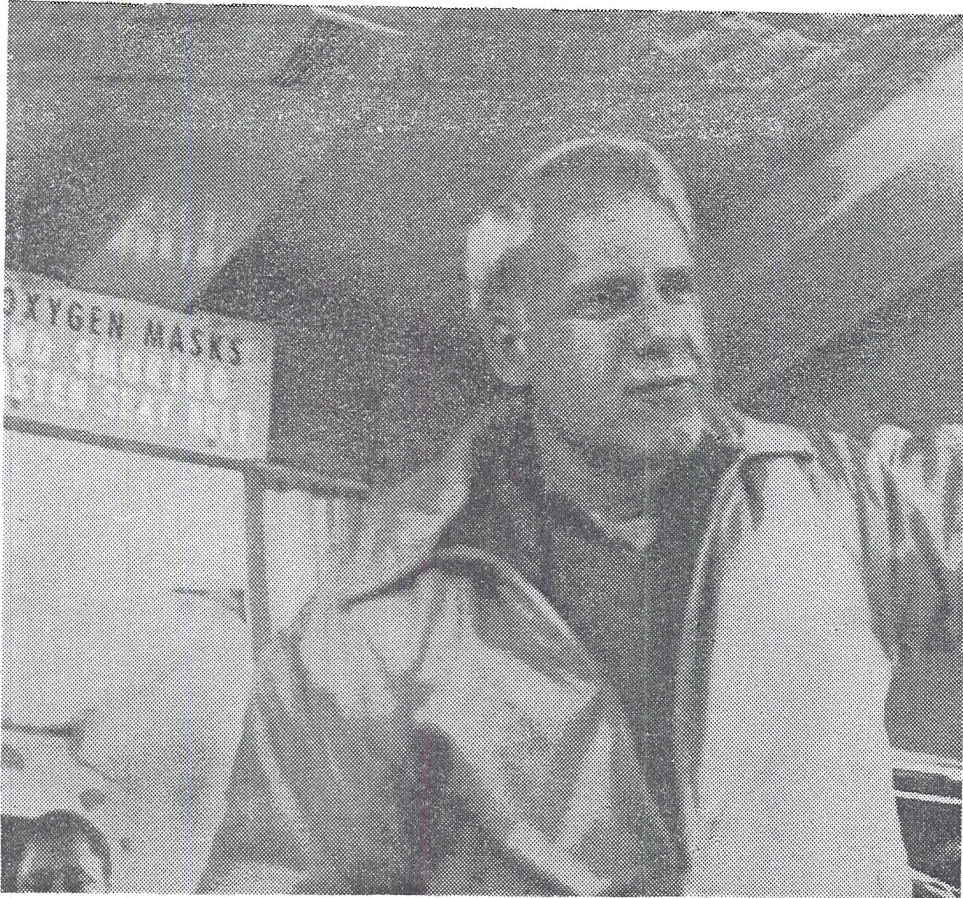


Photo By Bob Schieffer, CBS News

Defense Secretary Schlesinger boarding plane after bird watching in Belgium.

joined the Rand Corp. think tank staff in 1963. In recent weeks, he has been suggesting openly that the United States may indeed be moving toward a new, controversial and potentially expensive shift away from the nuclear policies that have prevailed for a decade.

In simple terms, what Schlesinger is saying is this: Since the early 1960s, American nuclear strategy has been based on what is called "mutual assured destruction," euphemistically known as MAD. It entails having the ability to destroy enough Soviet cities and in-

dustrial centers, even after absorbing a surprise first strike, to deter any such attack.

But Schlesinger, and others now in office, maintain that MAD was never really a strategy, but rather a way to measure the size of the

U.S. arsenal and how much damage it could do.

In his view, if the Soviet missile force—through the eventual addition of large and accurate multiple warheads to their current missiles—gets big enough to eventually knock out a portion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal in less than an all-out attack, it is no good just to have the ability to hit Soviet cities in return. The United States would know that American cities would then be destroyed in a second volley.

Schlesinger believes such a U.S. strategy is not credible in Russian eyes, nor even for that matter to most West European leaders.

Unless the multiple-warhead race is curbed through negotiations, Schlesinger wants the United States to have the ability to respond at least "selectively" against Russian military targets—presumably such things as certain large missile silos, underground control centers, command posts, missile storage depots and field headquarters—in a tit-for-tat basis short of holocaust.

In the past, even hints of such a shift brewing in the Pentagon have touched off criticism from some members of Congress who oppose now developments that could possibly touch off a new round in the arms race.

Yet, though Schlesinger has been saying some of these things publicly for several weeks now, Congress has not asked for answers to many of the questions such a shift would raise.

Schlesinger

It is not clear, for example, how such a shift would be accomplished. The United States already has thousands of MIRV-type multiple warheads, and hard to knock out military targets can be demolished by simply directing more of the existing force against them. Some work is already being done to allow quick re-targeting of a missile's electronic brain.

But this task, the military will argue, can also be done more efficiently and safely with new weapons, while leaving the old ones intact to carry out their current jobs. This, of course, could be enormously expensive and could also run the risk of misinterpretation by the Soviet Union and of a still larger new round in the arms race.

There are also other questions to ask: How would such a piecemeal nuclear war unfold? Is there anything in the world so important to Soviet national interests that would cause the Russians to launch less than an all-out attack on the United States, and gamble that its cities would not be destroyed in return?

Schlesinger is also reviewing the strategy and hardware of so-called "tactical" nuclear warfare in Europe.

At a NATO meeting earlier this year, officials say the United States discussed the "option" of removing some of the bigger 7,000 or so tactical atomic weapons now in Europe and replacing them with new "mini-nukes" that have been developed but not produced.

These are smaller atomic warheads for artillery pieces such as the 155-mm., 175-mm. and howitzers. One official says you can "Sort of dial-a-yield" to keep the explosion small, and that the weapons are "cleaner," meaning the effects of radioactive fallout are reduced.

Critics argue that the mini-nukes are very dangerous in that they lower the threshold at which conventional war becomes nuclear and will make it easier to decide upon their use.

But Schlesinger privately maintains, his aides say, that it can also be argued that such weapons could carry the signal of escalation to the Soviet Union in the hope of stopping a war, without creating atomic havoc in Europe by use of larger weapons.

For the moment, Congress has made the argument moot by refusing to authorize production. But under Schlesinger, the question is almost certain to be revived.

By instinct and training, Schlesinger is at home dealing with questions of European security and nuclear strategy. But the U.S. defense establishment is troubled by even deeper problems—everything from soaring personnel and weapons costs, to poor morale, lingering racial problems and congressional pork-barreling with favorite local defense programs.

Whether Schlesinger will dive into this broader collection of ills remains to be seen.