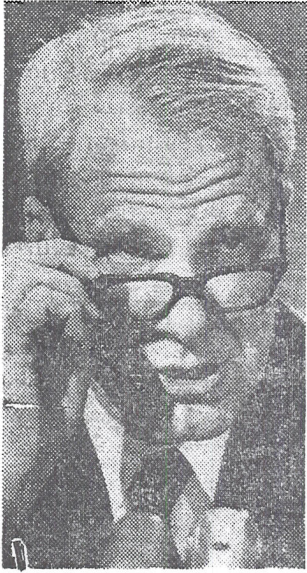


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U.S. 'First Strike' Called Conceivable



JAMES R. SCHLESINGER
... concedes change

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Under certain circumstances, the United States "conceivably" would fire its nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union before being fired upon, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger said yesterday.

He stressed at a breakfast meeting with reporters that there was "very, very low probability" of this happening but conceded his emphasis on fielding a first-strike force could be interpreted as a change in American nuclear strategy.

Schlesinger's remarks were the latest elaboration of a policy change he first enunciated on Jan. 10, 1974, before the Overseas Writers Association.

At that time Schlesinger referred to "a change in the strategies of the United States with regard to the hypothetical employment of central strategic forces; a change in targeting strategy."

Basically, the change amounts to improving the accuracy of American missiles so they could knock out some of the

missiles deployed in the Soviet Union—a so-called "counterforce" capability.

Critics of this strategy—such as Sen. Edward W. Brooke (R-Mass.)—have argued that deploying a first-strike force would put a hair trigger on American and Soviet ICBMs during a time of tension by tempting leaders on both sides to fire their missiles before they themselves could be fired upon.

This concern prompted then Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird to assure Brooke in a letter dated Nov. 5, 1970, that "we have not developed, and are not seeking to develop, a weapon system having, or which could reasonably be construed as having, a first-strike potential."

Schlesinger said yesterday in regard to those past assurances:

"We would prefer that neither side move in the direction of major counterforce capabilities or disarming first strike, if that were attainable, but the United

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States is not prepared to see the Soviet Union unilaterally attain that option and that capability . . . We will not be second in this regard. To that extent, if you define the letters to Sen. Brooke as excluding American response to a major Soviet movement towards counterforce capabilities, then the policy has changed."

President Ford told a group of reporters on Monday that there has not been "any serious change" in American nuclear strategy.

The change to deploying counterforce weapons is considered serious by some arms control specialists, including Gerard C. Smith, former director of the Arm Control and Disarmament Agency who headed the SALT negotiating team before leaving government in 1973. He has said that he sees little likelihood of containing a nuclear war once the firebreak between conventional and nuclear weapons has been breached.

"The notion that a nuclear firebreak, if ever breached, must inevitably lead to escalation to the top has been supported neither in American military planning, nor doctrine, nor policy statements," Schlesinger said yesterday.

The Defense Secretary's statement about the possibility of launching a first-strike against the Soviet Union came in this exchange:

Q "You have held out that we will not disavow first use. Does this imply that first use, in a tactical sense, could involve a Trident missile from Charleston, S.C. on the one hand and, on the other hand, would you tell us where the target would be—would the Soviet Union itself be excluded or included as a target area in a tactical use?"

A "I think that this is fairly clear in terms of our nuclear doctrine in the posture state-

ment and elsewhere. First use could conceivably, let me underscore conceivably, involve what we define as strategic forces and possibly, possibly, underscore possibly, involve selective strike at the Soviet Union. We do not necessarily exclude that, but it is indeed a very, very low probability."

"Any use of nuclear weapons would be a most agonizing decision for any political leader," Schlesinger said yesterday. "The purpose and thrust of U.S. military strategy in recent years is to raise the nuclear threshold so that we have serious conventional options that will not drive us to early recourse to nuclear weapons . . ."

"I would not expect," Schlesinger continued, "given any reasonable stalwartness of our conventional capabilities, early recourse of nuclear weapons—either strategic or tactical."

"We, however, will make use of nuclear weapons should we be faced with serious aggression likely to result in defeat in an area of very great importance to the United States in terms of foreign policy," Schlesinger said.

"This has clearly been the case in Western Europe for many years and has been stated again and again by all secretaries (of defense) and/or Presidents going back to the 1950s with regard to NATO."