

SF Examiner DEC 28 1975

Secret study: Ford negotiations spur arms race

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Chicago Sun-Times

WASHINGTON — A secret arms control study, ordered by former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, is developing into a political time bomb for the man who fired him, President Ford, and the man who replaced him, Ronald Runtsfeld.

The study, nearing completion by a group of expert consultants, contains a devastating critique of the approach Ford is taking to achieve a second Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaty prior to next year's presidential election.

The study concludes that nuclear weapons negotiations, as conducted by Ford and several of his predecessors, have served to spur the arms race rather than control it.

Specifically, the study criticizes Ford's agreement with Soviet party leader Leonid I. Brezhnev in Vladivostok last year for setting too high a limit on the number of missiles permitted each side.

It recommends more emphasis on relatively inexpensive research and development, to guard against a Soviet breakthrough, and less on expensive overkill in weapons production.

Runtsfeld is expected to receive the final version of the study by June. At that point, two months prior to the Republican National Convention, he will be confronted with the difficult decision of releasing it.

at the risk of hurting Ford politically, or keeping it secret, at the risk of being accused of coverup.

The decision is complicated by the fact that former California Gov. Ronald Reagan is pushing Ford hard on the defense issue and Schlesinger may become an adviser to Reagan or to Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), a possible Democratic presidential nominee.

Schlesinger ordered the study last year. Although he is generally thought of as a promoter of bigger and better nuclear weapons, those involved in the study say he is sympathetic to its central theme, that presidents have turned to arms negotiations rather than run the political risk of setting limits on

their own.

The study reportedly cites several instances in which presidents have concluded that the United States had more weapons than needed but shrank from cutting back out of fear of being accused of letting the nation become second best to the Soviet Union.

Instead, they have turned to the Soviets to get them off the hook by agreeing to a mutual cutback. But in the process of negotiations, the weapons promoters on both sides have gained the upper hand and pushed the ceiling much higher than either U.S. or Soviet political leaders may have desired.

For example, the study concludes that the late

Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev was seeking to offset the big U.S. lead in intercontinental missiles by deploying intermediate missiles in Cuba in 1962.

When the late President John F. Kennedy forced him to remove them, Khrushchev decided simultaneously to enter new arms negotiations and to give the go ahead to his Strategic Rocket Forces and Design Bureau to launch a crash program.

Schlesinger was said to be concerned about Soviet violations of the SALT treaty, less because they might tip the strategic balance than because they might encourage the Russian military to exploit new negotiations to extract more concessions from their own leaders and the United States.