

DOUBT ON POLICY DENIED BY LAIRD

He Says He 'Supported Fully'
the Cambodian Incursion

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WASHINGTON, May 6—Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that he had "supported fully" President Nixon's decision to employ American ground troops against Vietnamese Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.

In an apparent attempt to answer published reports that he had expressed misgivings, Mr. Laird said he had presented the case for the operations to the National Security Council.

Asked whether he had supported extensive American participation before the final decision, the Defense Secretary said: "Yes. I presented these plans and briefed the President and also the National Security

Continued on Page 14, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

Council on these particular proposals."

U.S. Arms are Delivered

During the day the State Department announced that the "first deliveries" of American weapons — rifles and carbines — to the Cambodian Government took place over the last few days. The quantities of small arms, transferred from American stocks in South Vietnam, were not made public.

In an impromptu briefing of newsmen at the Pentagon, Secretary Laird made the following points:

¶The United States does not intend to get bogged down in Cambodia and American troops should pull out in three to six weeks, depending on when expected heavy rains interfere with operations. President Nixon, conferring yesterday with members of Congressional committees, gave them what was described as "a firm commitment" that the troops would be withdrawn in three to seven weeks.

¶Critics are incorrect in saying that the attacks constitute an invasion that might have required congressional approval or at least consultation. Like other Administration officials, Mr. Laird insisted that the sanctuaries were under the "complete control" of the North Vietnamese and were being used to mount assaults on American and South Vietnamese forces.

¶The 24-hour Pentagon delay in making public a fourth large-scale weekend air attack on North Vietnam was a result of the tardy arrival of a report from Navy elements involved.

¶In an effort to hold down American casualties, he ordered heavy B-52 strikes against the Fishhook area, three to four days before the attack there; though that might telegraph the plans and enable the foe to withdraw.

Reports on Laird Persist

Despite Mr. Laird's denial, persistent reports circulating here portray him as having advised against substantial American involvement in offensives against the North Vietnamese and Vietcong in Cambodia and having later tried to minimize that role.

Administration officials have said privately that like Mr. Laird, Secretary of State William P. Rogers counseled restraint during the decision process. Mr. Rogers and State Department spokesmen have made no comment on the reports.

On April 23, a day after the National Security Council began to address the possibility of attacks on the sanctuaries, Mr. Rogers told a House Appropriations subcommittee that the United States had "no incentive to escalate."

Mr. Laird — commenting on reports in The New York Times and elsewhere — did not directly address the matter of his private advice to Mr. Nixon. He did say that he supported the use of Americans "as required to carry out this very important mission."

Alternate Proposal Described

According to one account, after it had become apparent that Americans would be involved significantly, Mr. Laird is said to have urged an operation against a small enemy enclave, supposedly containing only 800 troops, instead of the operation against the Fishhook area, reputedly containing thousands of troops and a headquarters complex.

Mr. Nixon is reported to have assured Congressional critics in the White House briefings, that American forces would not penetrate beyond a certain distance — 21 miles in one account, 18.75 miles in another.

Officials explained that his was meant to describe the distance across Cambodian territory where bunkers and other facilities have been built and to give assurances that the United state will not be drawn deep into Cambodia should the new Government of Premier Lon Nol become jeopardized by the enemy advance near Pnompenh.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, said today that allied troops would not be held rigidly to the 18.75-mile limitation. Some flexibility — another few miles — might be required to clean up the sanctuaries, he said.

Mr. Laird said he was aware of the concern of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Commander of American forces in Vietnam, that the next six months were crucial to the prospects of turning over major responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese. The Cambodian operations, if successful, should cost the enemy six to eight months to rebuild, thus limiting offensive capability, the Secretary explained.

He confirmed reports that South Vietnamese forces staged small-scale assaults into the Parrot's Beak area during April, before the decision was made for large ground and air attacks. Other sources say those raids, never before officially acknowledged, were limited to one-day forays.