

Laird's Policy Power

By Thomas B. Ross

WASHINGTON — (CST) — Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, convinced the military pulled an end run around him in the Cambodian intervention, is seeking ways to bring the Joint Chiefs under greater personal control.

The move could provoke a major test of wills between Laird, who opposed the Cambodian venture, and White House adviser Henry A. Kissinger, who acted as President Nixon's link with the military during the decision-making process.

Laird is understood to be particularly annoyed that the Joint Chiefs went to the White House with their proposal for renewed bombing of North Vietnam after he turned it down. The raids were resumed for a brief period May 1 without Laird's prior knowledge.

Ramifications

In retrospect, Laird is also

said to feel that on this and other matters the chiefs did not keep him adequately informed and failed to give sufficient weight to the political ramifications of the Cambodian operation.

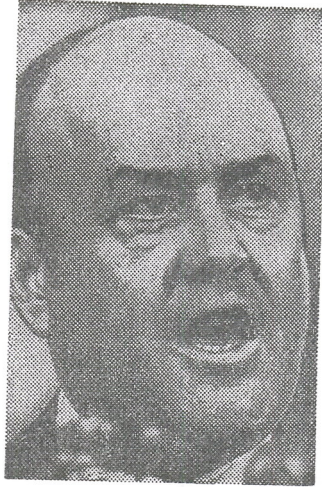
During the pre-intervention debate, well-placed Administration sources said, Laird favored bombing raids on North Vietnamese units in Cambodia but opposed the commitment of U.S. troops.

Against Nixon's public rationale for the operation, Laird reportedly argued that the Vietnamization program could proceed on schedule without moving into the Cambodian sanctuaries.

In his April 30 TV address, the President announced he was intervening in Cambodia to protect U.S. troops and assure the success of Vietnamization.

Political

But many high ranking Administration officials believe the real reason was political



MAJOR TEST OF THEIR WILLS LOOMS

Defense Sec. Melvin Laird, Nixon aide Henry Kissinger

— the desire to exploit the overthrow of neutralist Prince Norodom Sihanouk by anti-Communist Gen. Lon Nol.

Another factor, according to White House sources, was Hanoi's failure to heed a secret warning from the Presi-

dent not to move on Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital. Nixon reportedly volunteered to tolerate the border sanctuaries but not further incursions.

When field reports indicated the North Vietnamese were deploying westward,

Battle

Nixon apparently felt his diplomatic credibility would be destroyed unless he took action.

Laird alluded to the development Thursday at a breakfast meeting with reporters. He said one of the important reasons the United States intervened in Cambodia was that the North Vietnamese had turned their forces away from South Vietnam and "this was the time to hit them."

Contradiction

Asked if that did not contradict the President's explanation of the operation, Laird insisted there also was evidence of increased enemy activity in South Vietnam, supported from the Cambodian sanctuaries.

Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers, who also opposed the intervention, continued their loyal public defense of the decision after the fact.

In the bitter aftermath of the controversial Cambodian decision, a major struggle seemed under way within the Administration for priority access to the President.

"It's less a conflict between the civilians and the military," one key official said, "than between civilians and civilians — that is, between Laird and Kissinger."

There was concern in the Pentagon that Kissinger, the White House adviser on national security affairs, may be usurping Laird's role as the President's chief policy maker in military affairs.

To reassert his position, Laird reportedly has ordered tighter civilian oversight of the staff work of the Joint Chiefs.

There are indications that he also hopes to enlist his "blue-ribbon panel" of outside defense experts to come up with recommendations for strengthening his direct control over the military.