

Laird Moves To Reassert His Control

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After 16 months of giving military leaders their head at the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird has reportedly decided to rein them in.

Sources familiar with the situation were reluctant to go into much detail, except to say that in the fast-moving Cambodian crisis, the formalized machinery of the National Security Council was largely bypassed and that there were frequent direct contacts between White House officials and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with Laird feeling at times inadequately informed and involved.

"He had to reassert his leadership or lose control," said one department official. "He had a talk with the chiefs, with Henry Kissinger and with others." (Kissinger is President Nixon's National Security adviser and is regarded as a principal architect of the Administration's Cambodian strategy.)

Following his talks with military and White House officials, two procedures were changed.

First, the Joint Chiefs were

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instructed that no one will forward military proposals on matters such as the incursion into Cambodia or the bombings of North Vietnam either to Laird or to other government departments without first getting an opinion from the Pentagon's international security affairs office, sometimes described as a "little Senate Department within the Pentagon."

Second, the membership of the top-level Washington Special Action Group, commonly called was expanded to include civilian specialists on Vietnam from the Pentagon and the State Department, as well as a ranking Joint Chiefs of Staff officer. The special action group is headed by Kissinger.

EVENTS

One of Laird's aides offered this explanation of recent events:

When Laird became Secretary of Defense he tried to give greater initiative to the Joint Chiefs and the military services on policy and budgetary questions. "He knew they would take it as far as they would let them, that they would test him to see how far they could go," the aide said.

"As the crunch came in Cambodia," the official continued, "it became evident that dealings directly between the White House and the Joint Chiefs of Staff would continue to escalate, unless something was done.

"Mr. Laird felt it was time to say: 'Remember, I am Secretary of Defense and I respond to the White House, and White House requests come through me on these kinds of things.'"

ATTACKS

The phrase "these kinds of things" dealt with the four heavy air attacks on supply dumps and air defenses, together with certain day-to-day decisions on attacks into Cambodia, according to several sources.

As for the Cambodian operations, sources say that once a decision was made to attack the first two sanctuaries, subsequent decisions on raids into other areas were made by the Washington Special Action Group. Besides Kissinger, the group included David Packard, deputy secretary of Defense; U. Alexis Johnson, under secretary of state for political affairs; Richard C. Helms, director of central intelligence, and General Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, or in his absence, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman-designate.

Sources say the whole operation was so secret — to avoid leaks to the press — that all the staff work on specific questions was done by a handful of military men on the staff of the joint chiefs, without the usual referral to civilian specialists in the State Department, the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency.