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Laird Denies Role in False Bomb Logs

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Former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird authorized secret bombing missions in Cambodia in 1969 and 1970, but the decision to disguise the B-52 raids as attacks on South Vietnam was made by Air Force commanders in the field, Pentagon officials claimed yesterday.

However, seven hours after the Pentagon's chief spokesman placed responsibility for the false reporting at the level of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), the Defense Department retracted the statement, saying the cover-up procedure was "authorized and directed from Washington, not from SAC."

Laird, who rejoined the Nixon administration in the midst of the Watergate scandal in June as an adviser to the President, emphatically denied any complicity in the falsification of official bombing reports.

Disclosure that the Air Force dropped 104,000 tons of explosives on neutralist Cambodia in a 14-month period between March, 1969, and April 30, 1970, came as a result of testimony Monday before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Laird said yesterday he decided at the time to adopt a "no comment" posture to any queries about Cambodia bombing, and specifically denied that he approved the release of any falsified post-strike reports or the destruction of reports of actual B-52 raids on Cambodian Communist sanctuaries.

His statement conflicted with assertions made Wednesday by Assistant Defense Secretary Jerry W. Friedheim, who said that authorization for the coverup of the secret raids came from the "highest civilian and military officials in Washington." At the time of the raids, Laird was Secretary of Defense.

A White House spokesman subsequently said that the raids and "special security precautions" were discussed in the National Security Council.

See BOMBING, A8, Col. 1

BOMBING, From A1

recommended by Laird and approved by President Nixon.

Former Air Force Secretary Robert C. Seamans Jr. said in a telephone interview last night that he was "completely unaware" that the Cambodia bombing operations were being disguised and that true records were being destroyed.

"I was not in the chain of command, so it was not known to me . . . I was unaware of that information until I read it in the paper two days ago," said Seamans, who left the Pentagon in mid-May.

He said he recalled that information the Air Force later turned over to Congress did not include any B-52 sorties in Cambodia until the ground invasion of that country in May, 1970.

However, he said, he did not know that the Cambodian raids had been transferred to columns of figures that reflected bomb drops in South Vietnam, or that the post-strike reports were being altered.

Friedheim, during the course of an hour of intensive questioning by newsmen yesterday, claimed there was no conflict between Laird's disavowal and the Pentagon position.

"This is one of those happy situations where everyone is correct," he said.

Friedheim said that while Laird approved B-52 bombing of the Communist sanctuaries and was in general agreement that the air operations should be kept secret, he was not necessarily aware of the method in which the coverup was to be accomplished.

The "mechanics" of the false reporting scheme—which involved the burning of post-strike reports and the substitution of fictional targets in South Vietnam—was worked out at the level of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), Friedheim said.

At 6:30 p.m. yesterday, the Pentagon issued a "clarification" of Friedheim's remarks at the briefing, saying SAC was not involved. "We will be responding to the Senate Armed Services Committee's questions on this matter and we will not be commenting further, pending that response," the later Pentagon statement said.

When asked whether Laird could be expected to know whether the bombing reports had been altered, Friedheim

said, "I would think so." He added that the former defense chief probably "understood the security classification system."

Since testimony about the false reporting system was presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Monday by a former radar officer in Bienhoa, South Vietnam, the Pentagon has acknowledged that statistics on 3,600 covert B-52 sorties over Cambodia were transferred to columns that totaled bomb drops in South Vietnam during the same period.

The Pentagon also admitted that prior to March, 1970, hundreds of B-52 raids over Laos were carried out secretly and then were similarly disguised as attacks in South Vietnam. The practice of disguising bombing in Laos is believed to have been carried out during the Johnson administration, Pentagon officials said, even though bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos was common knowledge.

Friedheim at first refused to say at what military level the orders to burn post-strike bombing reports were authorized. Similarly, he dodged questions about which "senior military and civilian officials" approved the decision to disguise the Cambodia bombing raids as having occurred in South Vietnam.

At one point in the regular Pentagon briefing, he was asked if the orders originated in either MACV (military as-

sistance command), the Strategic Air Command, the Seventh Air Force headquarters or CINCPAC (the Pacific command). He answered, "The decision occurred someplace in that level."

Later, Friedheim said, "The mechanics of it [the coverup] no doubt were worked out in the major command, which would be SAC."

A significant factor in the decision to falsify the reports, Friedheim said, was security within the Air Force chain of command. He stressed that only those officials with a "need to know" were given the true bombing data, and that all others were excluded for "security and sensitive diplomatic" reasons.

"People would wonder where all that gasoline was going. Where all that ammunition was going. So, we had to implement some special security precautions," Friedheim said.

"When a B-52 takes off, it goes someplace," the Defense Department spokesman said. His assertion that "we were

not in the position to acknowledge where it went" was almost lost in the chortling by newsmen.

Friedheim said that the decision to send a copy of the inaccurate bombing reports to the Senate Armed Services Committee last month was made by Deputy Defense Secretary William P. Clements Jr. and Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"In retrospect, that probably was not the wisest thing to do," said Friedheim.

Sen. Harold E. Hughes (D-Iowa), a member of the committee, has accused the Pentagon of a "deliberate lie" in sending Congress falsified bombing reports as recently as last month.

Friedheim said he did not know the reason for the sending of falsified information to the committee. Apparently in a tongue-in-cheek vein, he added, "I'm pleased that we were able to work it out with the gentle prodding of the committee."