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**Laird Denies
Authorizing
Fake Reports**

From News Dispatches

CHICAGO, Aug. 10—Melvin R. Laird said today that while he was Defense Secretary he authorized an unusual "separate reporting system" on secret U.S. air strikes in Cambodia. He said the State Department requested secrecy for the operations.

He denied, however, that he authorized falsified reporting inside the Defense Department and said continued government silence on clandestine air operations after the U.S. ground invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 was a mistake.

Laird, chief domestic affairs adviser to President Nixon, spoke at a news conference a day after a top secret memo was made public which showed Laird's approval of procedures aimed at hiding the 1969-70 bombings from the news media.

At the time, the United States said it was respecting the neutrality of the Cambodian government, then headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Laird said that at that time the U.S. was bombing both South Vietnam and Cambodia. He devised a system under which the Cambodian bombing was reported only to the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the South Vietnamese bombing was reported publicly. But he said that he did not approve falsification of the reports that were made public.

"As far as the means by which the reporting procedure was carried out, the separate

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report was made directly to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on these strikes," he said. "I approved that."

"I did approve the separate reporting procedure on the Cambodian strikes. But I did not approve at any time the falsification of any Air Force, Army or any Defense Department reports."

The Laird-approved memo which was offered by Pentagon officials at the Senate Armed Services Committee hearings in Washington envisaged air strikes on secret targets inside Cambodia with other B-52s attacking normally assigned targets in South Vietnam.

"Strikes on these latter targets," the memorandum said, "will provide a resemblance to normal operations, thereby providing a credible story for replies to press inquiries."

The memo, dated Nov. 20, 1969, was written by Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff. It was initiated by Laird.

Laird said the air strikes were necessary to hit Cambodian sanctuaries long used by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

He said secrecy of the operations was requested by officials of the State Department whom he did not name.

"I do not want to hesitate to confirm completely that I authorized these strikes," Laird said. He said the initial plan was taken to the National Security Council and approved by him after "total and complete discussion at the highest levels of the White House."

"Their secrecy was not of great concern to the Defense Department, but to the State Department," Laird said.

Laird was asked if while he was Defense Secretary there was ever a "deliberate effort to mislead the American people."

Laird replied:

"No. I don't believe so. There are certain things in military operations that must be handled on a secret basis."

The Senate Armed Services Committee has spent the last three weeks investigating why the Defense Department falsely reported to Congress that 3,630 B-52 sorties over Cambodia occurred in South Vietnam.

At the conclusion of the first phase of the hearings Thursday, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that "no one authorized the falsification of reports."

He explained that the Cambodia raids were so highly classified that they could not be logged into the Pentagon's large data computer which he said could only store information classified "secret" or lower.