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Marine Landings To Aid GIs Hinted

WASHINGTON — (AP) — The Pentagon, apparently reflecting a change in announced policy, opened the possibility today that Marine combat troops might be landed in South Vietnam to bolster protection for the remaining American support forces.

Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim indicated in reply to newsmen's questions that Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, could substitute additional combat troops for some noncombat American military men now in Vietnam so long as he keeps within approved manpower levels and ultimately meets President Nixon's promise to reduce the over-all American presence in Vietnam by 20,000 men.

There are now fewer than 68,000 American troops there.

Marines Nearby

Friedheim said he "would not" consider such an action a resumption of U.S. ground combat activity, adding that "It is not our intention to resume the ground combat responsibility in South Vietnam."

Last Monday Friedheim said such a Marine landing "would be regarded as a re-introduction of ground forces" and cited statements by Secretary of State William Rogers that the United States would not do that.

There are reported to be about 5000 Marines — two

reinforced battalions — in amphibious ships in the South China Sea, together with helicopters and landing craft.

Friedheim, asked whether U.S. Marines or other American troops might be landed north of the Demilitarized Zone in North Vietnam, said, "I do not foresee that within our policy."

'No Change'

At the White House, deputy press secretary Gerald Warren was asked whether U.S. ground combat troops would be reintroduced in Vietnam.

"There is no change in our position," he replied.

When a questioner cited Friedheim's statement on Marine combat troops, Warren said:

"I am not going to give

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you a White House view on that."

U.S. officials appear to be staking their hopes for defeat of the offensive on grinding down the enemy's forces.

One official said such attrition can work if the South Vietnamese can hold — a question of some doubt. — after the crumbling of South Vietnam's 3rd Infantry Division and the loss of Quang Tri.

American troops still in Vietnam include about six battalions of Army infantry — about 6000 men — whose mission is to safeguard the noncombat American servicemen there.

GIs in Clash

There was a clash yesterday between a U.S. Army patrol and an enemy force about 15 miles from Da Nang. Two Americans were wounded.

Friedheim stressed that Abrams has "a great deal of flexibility" to determine the composition of the American force in Vietnam.

He said the six battalions of infantry is "not a ceiling" for Abrams and indicated that, if he chose, Abrams could pull out support troops and replace them with additional U.S. combat men from outside Vietnam, so long as he maintained the over-all withdrawal program.

2000 in Peril

In effect, Friedheim was drawing a distinction between the possible reintroduction of American ground troops as an emergency safety measure and a reintroduction to take up the ground combat responsibility which was officially handed to the South Vietnamese army last summer.

Some 2000 Americans in

the Hue-Phu Bai area are considered perhaps the most vulnerable at this point in the North Vietnamese offensive.

The Marines off South Vietnam are principally two battalions totaling some 3000 Marine infantry along with supporting elements.