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Tour of Mid-America

Laird Stumping Costs the Public

WASHINGTON (AP) — At taxpayers' expense, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird traveled through the Midwest this week, defending administration programs and attacking Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern at virtually every stop.

Despite his comments, Laird and Pentagon aides insisted the trip—and several others like it over the past weeks—was nonpolitical.

That means the taxpayers, not the Committee for the Reelection of the President, picked up the expenses for his four-engine Air Force jet trip.

Traditionally, secretaries of defense have remained aloof from partisan politicking during presidential campaigns but Laird, on every one of these trips, has criticized the Democratic nominee.

This week, his plane put down at Wichita Falls, Tex., home of Sheppard Air Force base, and Fort Worth, Tex., Oklahoma City, and Wichita, Kan., all sites of big defense plants employing thousands.

"Today we are second to none and we know the American people will reject the counsel of indecisive people who would settle for second-best," he declared Thursday in Wichita.

To his Fort Worth audience, Laird spoke of concern over "calls for defense-budget cuts that would magnify our country's risks and lessen our prospects for lasting peace."

"Those who want to cut defense spending ... are not really interested in relieving the taxpayer of any part of his burden" he told civic clubs in Oklahoma City.

"On the contrary, they want to dangerously slash defense spending so they can spend more tax dollars for other things such as a \$1,000 giveaway for every man, woman, and child in this country."

Asked on a CBS radio program earlier this week if he was playing a political role in the Nixon campaign, Laird replied: "No I'm not."

"I will answer charges, however, that are made in connection with running the Department of Defense, with our national-security requirements, or personal attacks along the line made by Sen. McGovern last Sunday."

"These are all nonpolitical appearances," insisted Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim. Who, reporters asked, determines whether they are political or nonpolitical? "The events are sponsored by nonpolitical organizations" which invited Laird to attend, Friedheim replied.

Laird's travels since early August have taken him to St. Louis and Los Angeles, two more cities where cutbacks in the aerospace and defense industries have added thousands to the unemployment rolls.

Laird told voters there that any further cuts in military spending, as advocated by McGovern, would throw thousands more out of work.