

Laird Doubted but Defended Bombing*By Mary McGrory**Washington Star News Service***Washington**

Once again, and for the last time, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird is doing the "secret dove" number.

From the sanctuary of a background briefing, he has lifted the curtain on his doubts about the decision to smash Hanoi. While he did not exactly oppose it, he seems not to regard it as the best idea he ever heard.

With a self-righteousness that another man might blush to summon at such a moment, he points out that he has not publicly defend-

ed the infamous raids as "a military necessity."

Million of Americans who have never set foot in the Pentagon had noted immediately that aspect of the act. It is, in fact, the source of their rage and shame. All Laird has done, as before, is to make people wonder why he didn't try to stop it.

Country

At the time of Cambodia, when the country was in shock, Laird hinted that he, too, had had questions about the wisdom of the venture. When pressed for details, he explained fuzzily that his early doubts had been resolved when the military situation changed.

When Haiphong was mined, Laird's second thoughts again found their

way into print. But promptly thereafter, he went up to Capitol Hill and defended the move with his usual bluster. The White House apparently had secret intelligence that his dissent bespoke not grave moral concern but simply further political ambitions, something the President always understands.

Laird's predecessor, Robert S. McNamara had a reputation for under-the-counter dovishness. Laird set about furthering the tradition with his usual bluntness. Vietnam, he said privately, was a bummer: He would devote every waking hour to ending U.S. involvement.

It is true that he presided over the withdrawal of most of the troops McNamara had

dispatched, but his intermittent attempts to act as the conscience of the administration have been as futile as the much-trumpeted raid on the empty prison camp at Son Tay. He leaves office with American participation at a new high and a new low in the sordid history of the war.

House

When he goes before the House Armed Services Committee this week, he may tell us more about how the ghastly decision was reached. The White House has maintained the silence of a submarine in enemy waters. Maybe Laird warned the President that it might not play well in Peoria. If so, he was right. So many Americans, including

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loyal Republicans, have penned their revulsion to the President that the White House flatly refuses to disclose the mail count.

While Laird was putting a sliver of daylight between himself and the smoking ruins, administration loyalists were proffering the chilling reassurance that the decision was "unanimous." If anything could be more appalling to those who share Senator William Saxbe's view that the President had "lost his senses," it is the revelation that none of the men around him came to theirs.

Laird was in Hawaii while the torture was in progress. The burden of defending the indefensible fell to his wretched underling, Jerry Friedheim, who added to the

public fury by suggesting that the North Vietnamese were killing themselves by downing B-52's which crashed on civilians.

In this, he was merely aping his master. Laird, when the French embassy in Hanoi was destroyed several months ago, suggested that the North Vietnamese had done it with a missile gone awry.

Alibi

Laird's alibi is "Vietnamization." He likes catchy words like that. He gave us the immortal phrase "protective reaction raids" for ad lib bombing and once memorably referred to the ABM as "a building block to peace."

He would answer every question about Vietnamiza-

tion except the crucial one, which still is, "what if it fails?"

To the only man who counts, President Thieu, Laird has failed to convey his faith in the process. Supposedly one of the reasons Hanoi was subject to the worst bombing raids in history was partly to convince him that "Vietnamization" works. Even the inventive Laird can't think of any other reason.

Laird will depart with the usual good wishes that attend a man who tells the press what he should have told the President. Whatever his other accomplishments — and he has recounted them in a volume the size of the Manhattan directory — as a "secret dove" Laird has bombed out.