

U.S. Could Now Quit Vietnam, Laird Says

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Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird told Congress yesterday that "complete termination of American involvement in the war" was now possible because South Vietnam could now defend itself, and that safe return of U.S. prisoners and an accounting of men missing in action was, in his view, the sole issue standing in the way of a final pullout.

Appearing before a special session of the House Armed Services Committee to report on his four years in office, Laird said repeatedly that he did not want to discuss the renewed peace negotiations in Paris.

Yet Laird left the clear impression at the hearings and at a brief meeting with newsmen later that he thought only the POW and MIA issue stood in the way of an end to U.S. involvement in the war.

Laird's views, on the surface at least, appeared to conflict with the comments of presidential aide Henry A. Kissinger. At a Dec. 16 press conference, Kissinger indicated that other substantive questions, such as the proposed cease-fire monitoring force and an agreement that "the two parts of Vietnam would live in peace with each other," were delaying a final settlement. Kissinger did not indicate the POWs were a prob-



MELVIN R. LAIRD ... gives assessment

blem at the time, though he did not discuss many specifics.

Laird, however, has steadfastly said that his responsibility was the military solution, or so-called "Vietnamization track," which involves equipping Saigon's Forces and turning over the war to them, and not the negotiating side.

His public remarks yesterday—appearing as the first administration official to go before Congress since the massive 12-day U.S. bombing raids against the North last month

See LAIRD, A13, Col. 1

LAIRD, From A1

—tend to reinforce private indications that whatever the outcome of the new Paris talks, Laird personally believes that U.S. military objectives in Vietnam are completed and the grounds for a pullout are already present once the prisoner issue is set-

tense Secretary.

Rep. Otis G. Pike (D-N.Y.) reflected the public confusion about the cause of the breakdown of the earlier peace terms and the issues that still divide Hanoi and Washington.

Pike said he could not understand how Kissinger, in December, could say that an agreement is 99 per cent completed if the POW question—obviously a big one—was not resolved.

If the POW issue was part of the 99 per cent, and if the South Vietnamese are able to defend themselves, why is it necessary, Pike asked, to bomb North Vietnam with B-52s, F-111s and lots of other planes that the South Vietnamese will not receive from the U.S.?

Laird again said he would not discuss the negotiation "track" but did say that Pike's "assumption," presumably about the POW issue, was "not correct."

Administration officials have claimed privately that the North Vietnamese reneged on the POW question in December, tying it to release of Communist political prisoners in the South where earlier there had been no strings.

Hanoi has claimed that the U.S. changed its stance under pressure from South Vietnamese President Thieu. Privately, some officials concede that Kissinger's description of 99 per cent completed was a poor one.

Laird defended the December bombing citing President Nixon's May 8 speech which said bombing would continue until there were "serious negotiations" leading to an internationally supervised cease-fire, plus the POW and MIA solutions.

Pike warned Laird that he and the President were going to run into trouble, that "the American people feel cheated" because of administration silence and contentions that "you cannot tell us these things."

Laird said Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would fully brief the committee, this afternoon, behind closed doors.

Though Laird's Pentagon reign won overwhelming approval from the normally friendly committee, he drew sharp criticism from Rep. Robert L. Leggett (D-Calif.).

"Overall, I rate you a minus," Leggett said. Linking Laird with a variety of controversies, such as B-52 losses and contract cost overruns, Leggett said, "I just can't let you leave here and claim success."

Laird, visibly angered, shot back that he had helped end

the war for the U.S., that three of the four contracts Leggett mentioned were started by the Johnson administration and that Congress bore some responsibility for the other one, the DD-963 destroyer project.

The Defense chief also appeared to deliver an on-the-spot reprisal, saying he would launch an investigation immediately into shipyards, starting in California where Leggett comes from.

Elsewhere in his report to Congress, Laird made these points:

- The Soviets, as expected, have made their first flight test of a large new missile which Laird described as an "SS-9 type." The SS-9 is Russia's largest intercontinental rocket, with some 290 already deployed.

- Thus far, however, the Soviets apparently have not demonstrated the ability to equip their new missile with multiple independently targeted (MIRV).

- A new version of a smaller Russian missile, the SS-11, also appears "ready for deployment," but will "probably" be deployed without MIRV, using instead a less accurate, buckshot-style multiple warhead.

- The new large missile, which may eventually carry MIRVs, will probably go in about 30 new large ICBM silos still under construction. The new SS-11 version will probably go in about 60 new silos which Laird said could be completed in "a matter of months."

- The first Soviet Delta-class submarine, carrying 12 rather than 16 missiles, will soon be operational, probably carrying a new 4,000-nautical-mile-range SSN-8 sub missile.

- He estimated Russia now has 45 modern missile subs either operating or under construction. Sources said about 16 are still being constructed

- and fewer than 30 are operational.

- The Soviets are building their first aircraft carrier, and are expected to assign "a significant number" of a newly developed bomber to "strategic and naval air units." The new bomber is viewed by most intelligence estimates as primarily designed for medium-range Europe and Asia targets.

- Certain types of U.S. aid to South Vietnam will continue for a while, presumably even if a negotiated settlement is reached. "Financial support will be required for an indefinite period in the future if we are to sustain the RVNAF [Vietnamese armed forces] logistics system and

provide essential support in the form of POL [fuel and oil], ammunition, repair parts and technical assistance."

More than \$5.3 billion worth of new military equipment has been delivered to Saigon in just over three years, plus \$1 billion worth of U.S. facilities, Laird said.

- This country's prosperous allies in Europe and Japan have responsibilities to shoulder for both improved defenses of their own and for more of the cost of the U.S. defensive shield and must understand the "fiscal unreality of a continuing U.S. balance of payments deficit."

If NATO allies let their own defenses slip, Laird said, "in the years immediately ahead it will be almost impossible to support an undiminished American troop presence in Europe . . ."

- Negotiations on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) between Eastern and Western bloc forces may begin in the fall, but despite this and other initial arms agreements, talk of a "profound and lasting shift" in Soviet attitudes toward the West is "premature."

- In South Korea, Laird held out the prospects for a complete pullout of U.S. troops if Congress approves the full program of military aid for Korea.

- About 87 per cent of the entire U.S. intelligence budget (unofficially estimated at about \$5 billion annually) is paid for by the Pentagon, Laird revealed. But he warned against making the product of that intelligence effort anything but "objective and independent," whether it comes from the Pentagon, CIA or military services.

Some Defense officials interpreted this as backing for departing CIA Director Richard Helms who, in some accounts, was described as having suffered inside the administration because of differing assessments between the CIA and other groups.

- Laird warned that his department "must not become a bail-out agency for companies that cannot live up to valid and binding contracts."

- The cost of maintenance of military equipment now amounts to about \$20 billion annually and is rising faster than the value of the weapons themselves.