

U.S. Says It Still Will Not Use Nuclear Arms

By Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writer

The White House, Pentagon and State Department all moved yesterday to make it clear that American military policy in Indochina continues to rule out the use of nuclear weapons against North Vietnam.

This re-assertion of policy came on the heels of a minor furor created Thursday by William P. Clements Jr., President Nixon's nominee to become deputy secretary of defense, the second highest post in the Pentagon.

Questioned during a Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing, Clements had refused to rule out recommending the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam at some point if peace negotiations fail.

Yesterday afternoon, Clements issued a statement through the Pentagon "to clear up promptly any confusion that may have unintentionally resulted" from his remarks.

During his confirmation hearing, Clements was pressed on the nuclear issue by Sen. Harold E. Hughes (D-Iowa) and responded that he "would not eliminate" in his own mind the possibility of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam, "and that is not to say I would be in favor of it either."

Clements' refusal to close the door on such a prospect appeared to conflict with administration policy stated publicly on April 17, 1972, by Secretary of State William P. Rogers. The policy clearly prohibited use of such weapons.

The Saigon newspaper Tin Song, considered a mouthpiece for South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, went further than Clements' remarks had and reported that the nominee had "clearly told the committee the inevitable: the U.S. may use the atomic bomb if the negotiations break up."

In Paris, a North Vietnamese government spokesman used Clements' remarks to "vigorously condemn this war

hysteria on the part of the warmongering American ruling circles and appeal to world public opinion to act in time to stay their criminal hands."

In West Germany, the Red Cross appealed to Chancellor Willy Brandt's government to help prevent "a regression into nuclear warfare" in Vietnam.

At the Pentagon yesterday, spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim initially declined to comment on Clements' remarks, claiming it would not be "appropriate" while the hearings continue. He declined even to re-state for newsmen U.S. nuclear policy in Indochina.

Friedheim did point out that Clements was still a nominee for office, not yet a defense official and that "his remarks at a confirmation hearing obviously do not change or state U.S. policy."

Yet, the question of whether a change was occurring was left hanging until Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, apparently listening in his office over a closed-circuit broadcast to the exchange between newsmen and Friedheim, sent a hand-written note to Friedheim.

"Secretary Laird recalls for you," Friedheim read, "that he has said before that he would not recommend the use of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia."

State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray, referring to Rogers' April policy statement against use of nuclear weapons, said, "That remains our policy."

At the White House, presidential press secretary Ronald L. Zeigler referred to Clements as giving only "hypothetical testimony" and reiterated that Mr. Nixon has always stressed that "nuclear weapons were not one of the contingent elements that he would use in relation to Vietnam."

13 January 1973

Clements' statement issued later in the day said he was in agreement with the previously stated U.S. policy.

Asked if Clements, a millionaire Texas oil drilling contractor, was aware of that policy before he testified, Friedheim would only cite general comments made by Clements during the hearings that "he was not aware of everything" having to do with defense issues.

Friedheim also seemed to back away from another assessment Clements offered before the committee involving his view that the Soviet Union was intent on achieving a first-strike nuclear capability against the United States.

"I don't know that we can make that assessment," Friedheim said.

Friedheim noted that Clements had spent most of his time thus far working on Pentagon personnel problems.