

Laird Defends His '69 Bombing Order

Washington

Former Defense Secretary Melvin B. Laird called a press conference yesterday to tell why he ordered the 1969-70 clandestine bombing of Cambodia.

He said the bombings were approved by President Nixon and were necessary to support the early withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam. He defended the secrecy on the ground of diplomatic sensitivity.

Laird denied, however, that he had approved falsification of the records and reporting on the raids.

Laird told the White House news conference that Mr. Nixon approved the B-52 raids over a 14-month period and the National Security Council "was unanimous" in deciding that they should not be made public at the time because of possible diplomatic embarrassment involving Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had secretly given his approval for the assaults on the enemy sanctuary.

(Sihanouk denied Tuesday that he had given his approval for the air raids. The denial came in a cablegram sent to the New York Times in response to an inquiry.)

Sihanouk was deposed as Cambodian chief of state in March, 1970 and now lives in exile in China.

"I recommended these strikes," said Laird. "I happened to be in Saigon at the time they started.

"I recommended the raids because I felt these areas were occupied by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong," he added. "There were no Cambodians in the area."

He said that the raids were designed to support the early withdrawal of troops from South Vietnam under the Vietnamization program.

"I believe those strikes were helpful and did help American personnel," he said. "I felt these strikes were necessary."

Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim disclosed a week ago that Laird had ordered the secret air war but had not authorized the falsification of records to cover it up.

Friedheim also told of false reporting techniques in which two sets of books were kept, a false set stating the bombing took place in South Vietnam and a true set that recorded the 3600

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B-52 sorties in Cambodia.

Yesterday, Laird said the true reports on the sorties came directly to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and only a handful of men, including the President and Laird were privy to them.

He backed former Air Force Secretary Robert C. Seamans who told congressional investigators Wednesday that recorded the 3630 raids had been secretly conducted over Cambodia while he was the top Air Force official.

Laird said that under a reporting chain of command, which Congress initiated and authorized, the figures never got to Seamans.

But he also called it a

"foulup" that he truth was not transmitted to members of the House and Senate Armed Services committees.

ADDRESS

Laird said that Mr. Nixon was apparently referring to "combat troops" when he told a national television audience in a major address on April 30, 1970 that Cambodia's neutrality had been respected for the previous five years.

In that address Mr. Nixon announced that he was sending U.S. troops into Cambodia for the first time to destroy the enemy-occupied sanctuaries.

As for himself, Laird contends that he always gave a "no comment" when asked about published reports that the clandestine operations were being carried out over Cambodia without American official recognition.

Laird gathered reporters together in the Roosevelt Room at the White House to knock down reports that he was dissatisfied with his new post as chief domestic adviser to Mr. Nixon and was preparing to quit.

"I'm a stayer," he declared. "I will be staying as long as I feel I can make a contribution," he added.

There have been reports that Laird was disenchanted with his role and felt that he was being cut off from the main stream in the White House.

United Press