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Schlesinger
Rebuked by
Mansfield

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Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) sharply reproached Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger yesterday for "offhand comments" about "highly volatile international situations."

Mansfield expressed "the gravest concern" about remarks by Schlesinger which he said "suggested the possibility of U.S. military incursions into the Middle East to bring out the oil, and a reinvolvement of our forces in the still-unsettled conflict of Vietnam."

The unusual personal criticism by Mansfield was made as an aside in a foreign policy review before the Senate Democratic Caucus in which he discussed the "bitter and tragic lesson of Vietnam." The Senate has gone on record, Mansfield emphasized, against "future arbitrary use of U.S. forces abroad."

Almost simultaneously, Schlesinger was telling a news conference at the Pentagon that on the basis of present evidence, no "major, all-out assault" by the Communists of the 1972 magnitude appears in prospect in South Vietnam.

"Consequently," said Schlesinger, "if there is no major assault, there is no need, there will be no need to consider the issue of the employment of U.S. tactical air. I think that, therefore, the probability of that involvement has gone down."

It would be "unwise for the North Vietnamese," nevertheless, Schlesinger added, "to discount the realities of American military power."

With those remarks Schlesinger scaled down language he used in a television interview on Jan. 7, which had helped to provoke Mansfield's criticism. Pentagon officials said Schlesinger was unaware of Mansfield's remarks prior to his own comments yesterday.

Schlesinger, on Jan. 7, said that if North Vietnam launched an all-out offensive in the South, and if President Nixon asked Congress for authority to send U.S. "tactical aircraft" back into the war, "I believe that the request is highly likely to be forthcoming..."

In the same interview, Schlesinger was asked if there is "a risk" of an increasing demand in this country to "show force" to overturn the Arab embargo on oil for the United States. Schlesinger replied that "that is a risk" and "one should not tempt fate by pushing the concept of national sovereignty too far" to "cripple... the industrialized world." Schlesinger also said that "we won't come to the contingency that you mentioned, in my judgment."

To some observers, the cross-fire from Mansfield yesterday was the prelude to clashes between Schlesinger and Democratic liberals on the Secretary's widening calls for a broader array of nuclear and other weaponry, to bargain from strength with the Soviet Union. Others saw Mansfield's criticism as essentially lingering concern about new U.S. involvement in Indochina.

Mansfield said that "certain offhand, widely publicized comments... recently by the Secretary of Defense" are beyond "the compass of... (his) responsibility..." Mansfield said "What this nation may or may not find it necessary to do abroad is a question best left for the consideration of the President with his Secretary of State and with the elected representatives of the people in the Congress."

The Senate Armed Services Committee, Mansfield suggested, "which has oversight of the Defense Department should examine into any tendencies to stray beyond that compass."

Mansfield, by contrast, lauded Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger for his global diplomatic activity, saying "Mr. Kissinger has the confidence of the Senate, as indicated by the overwhelming vote for his confirmation last year."

At the Defense Department an official noted that Mansfield's criticism was made before the Democratic Caucus, and said that Schlesinger, in discussing international aspects of the defense policy, was doing what his predecessors have done—speaking out on defense issues. "There is no way for the Secretary of Defense to stay out of the defense side of foreign policy," said a Schlesinger aide, as there is "no way for Secretary of State Kissinger to avoid defense issues."

Associates of Schlesinger disputed the contention that his public comments, which aroused Mansfield, were "offhand" or shooting-from-the-hip. Instead, an aide stated, he was engaged in "sending a signal to Hanoi—one day you send a signal to Hanoi, and one day to Saigon."