

NEWS BRIEFING

BY

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

MELVIN R. LAIRD

AT

PENTAGON

TUESDAY

DECEMBER 16, 1969

10:30 A.M.

SECRETARY LAIRD: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen:

I thought I might make a short opening statement and then I'll be glad to respond to questions.

I thought it might be helpful to follow through on President Nixon's speech last night with some brief additional comments concerning the Vietnamization program and then to make myself available to handle any of the questions which you may have today.

As indicated on the chart which is immediately back of me, last year at the Christmas period the troop ceiling in Vietnam was 549,500. Following the President's meeting with President Thieu at Midway in June, the President announced a reduction in the troop ceiling to 524,500. Then following this, in September, the President announced a further reduction in the authorized ceiling, with the objective of reaching an authorized ceiling of 484,000 in December, and last night the further announcement was made by the President to reduce that troop ceiling to 434,000 effective April 15, 1970.

This makes a total reduction which has been announced in the authorized troop ceiling of 115,500 since the Vietnamization program started on July first.

As you know, our actual strength in Vietnam as of yesterday, December 15, was 472,500. I want to make this very clear: this figure fluctuates as long as it is below the ceiling figure. Of course, this year as in the

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past, some of the troop replacements in the pipeline going to Vietnam were held back because of the Christmas period, and this figure of 472,500 could fluctuate and go up or down, but the important figure that we use for planning purposes, I am sure all of you who cover the Pentagon realize, is the authorized troop ceiling figure. I think it's important for us to understand that the strength figure does vary from one to two percent below that (ceiling) figure but the figure that we use for planning purposes has always been the authorized troop ceiling.

Just prior to the completion of the Phase II Vietnamization redeployments on December 15, we were able to return home all of the National Guard troops and all of the Reserve troops that had been called to duty for Vietnam service.

At this very time, the President is meeting with representatives of each of these units that did service in Vietnam, and I wish to join with him in wishing these Reserve and National Guard troops that have returned home so that they can be with their families during this Christmas period, not only a very Merry Christmas, but I also wish to express to them our deep appreciation for a job well done. This was important, we thought, to see that they were all returned to the United States so that they could be with their families during the holiday period.

This makes our force in Vietnam, with the exception of draftees, a completely volunteer force now and the Reserve units and the National Guard units no longer are on duty in Vietnam.

Looking ahead now as to the implementation of President Nixon's announcement of last night, I have directed that there be a third redeployment conference to be convened early next month at the headquarters of Admiral Jack McCain, Commander in Chief of the Pacific, at Camp Smith in Hawaii. That conference will take place immediately following the start of the new year.

I want to express at this time how extremely proud I am as Secretary of Defense in the manner in which Admiral McCain and General Abrams, together with the commissioned and noncommissioned officers of their staffs, have put their shoulder to the wheel on this Vietnamization program since its start following the Midway conference in July. We have made real progress and it is moving forward ahead of schedule.

Before turning to your questions, I want to add a word of caution about the Vietnamization program. I think that there are some people, when they talk of the Vietnamization program, that indicate that every

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battle, every activity that goes on in Vietnam will meet with success. Now, it's true that in the major encounters that we have had recently in Vietnam, the forces of the South Vietnamese have been extremely successful. But I do not want anyone to assume that those forces will never suffer a defeat in any battle, because in a war such as this, there will be times when they will suffer some setbacks. We must be prepared for those temporary setbacks, and I hope that the success that we have recently been having will not be disturbed by a temporary setback should one occur at some future time.

The President's announcement last night, of course, marks the completion of another significant milestone in President Nixon's program for peace which, as all of you know, is a two-phased program. It combines negotiations in Paris with Vietnamization, as far as Vietnam is concerned.

I would also further like to announce that the President has directed me to go to Vietnam early in February to assess the situation as it affects our security, the security of American forces, and also to assess the level of military activity on the part of the enemy and the infiltration from the north.

I will go to Vietnam and I have asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to accompany me on this trip. This (trip) was directed by the President of the United States yesterday and that trip will be made.

I will be glad to respond to any of your questions.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, if there is a substantial rise in infiltration how can you take the risk of ordering a 50,000 man cut before it's clarified?

SECRETARY LAIRD: It is true that there has been an increase in infiltration within the last few weeks. However, I want to make it very clear that the infiltration is substantially below the infiltration of 1968, when you consider the infiltration of 1969.

About seven weeks ago we noticed an increase in the input, then there was a leveling off and there has been a further increase in the past few weeks. This increase however does not put us in a position where we cannot go forward with the program as planned because the force level, as far as the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong are concerned, is much lower than it was a year ago. We have taken this into consideration in our program, and the success that we have been making in the Vietnamization program, in the military aspects of that program, makes this announcement of the President's possible.

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QUESTION: Following that, the President said that despite this increase in infiltration he was ordering this reduction and called it a risk he was taking for peace. I can understand that it is a risk, but how is it a risk for peace?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I think it is most important for us to show that we are proceeding on two fronts. The two fronts are our real desire for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, keeping in mind our primary objective, that is, the primary objective of peace, and the right of self-determination for the people of South Vietnam.

We have not made great progress, as far as the Paris peace talks are concerned. As you know, the Secretary of State and I met with our negotiating team in Paris last week. I had the opportunity to meet with Ambassador Lodge in Paris and then on Monday, the Secretary of State and I met with the negotiating team. Although we are not encouraged about the activities in Paris, we still are pressing for a negotiated settlement. The President made that very clear once again last night--that we stand ready to negotiate.

I believe the Vietnamization program, as we show this movement, is preparing the South Vietnamese to face up to the responsibility for the combat responsibility in South Vietnam in Phase I of our Vietnamization program. As we show our determination to go forward with Phase II of the Vietnamization program, which makes it possible for the South Vietnamese to handle their own support activities--whether they be in the area of artillery, aircraft, logistics support--this puts the North Vietnamese and Hanoi on notice that we are serious about this program, not only as far as turning over the combat responsibilities but in giving the forces of South Vietnam the kind of support that is needed and necessary for them to be successful.

I believe the President again last night, as well as in his May 14 speech and his November 3 speech, has tried to deliver this message as clearly and as concisely as any President or any leader of any country in the world could.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, will the cut in actual troop strength in the next four months roughly equal the cut in the authorized ceiling?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I will direct the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CINCPAC, General Abrams to stay within the troop ceiling for programming purposes. I will not project actual troop strengths because this is one thing that can only cause the Department of Defense and me as Secretary of Defense credibility problems. With more than 40,000 men going in-country and out of country just on a rotation basis, it is a very great mistake for us to get into projections of actual strength.

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So, the figures that we will use for all of our planning and in all of our directives to the commanders will be the authorized troop ceiling, and that will be the ceiling that will govern our activities as far as the Department of Defense.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, in the event that there is a substantial increase in enemy activity, a substantial increase in infiltration, is there a possibility that in response these authorized ceilings could be increased?

SECRETARY LAIRD: That's a very "iffy" question and I don't know if everyone heard the question. But it is based upon a major increase in infiltration, a major increase in enemy activity and certain other contingencies which I do not anticipate will take place. But I can assure you that on my visit to Vietnam the first week in February, those problems will be looked at very carefully by me.

This program which we have announced -- which the President announced last night -- is based upon the progress which we have made in turning over responsibility to the South Vietnamese to meet the VC as well as the North Vietnamese threat.

When I came into this office as Secretary of Defense there was no program approved in this building to prepare the South Vietnamese to meet a North Vietnamese threat. We have taken into consideration in our program planning the possible North Vietnamese threat. Those projections are based not only on the VC threat, but on the North Vietnamese threat, and this is what we have done for our planning purposes in the plan that has been approved by President Nixon.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, the President also said that if this happens, he would take proper action. I presume this is not a slap on the wrist. It would be military retaliation? Could you discuss that?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I can assure you that this will be

watched very closely as far as the Department of Defense is concerned, and we will certainly make any necessary recommendations to the President of the United States to protect the security of the American forces in Vietnam. But I will not get into a discussion of any contingency plans. It does not serve any useful purpose.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, if the Vietnamization program, as it proceeds, makes the situation increasingly disadvantageous to the North Vietnamese and to the Viet Cong, why should it be expected that they would facilitate the pursuit of this program by keeping infiltration low and U. S. casualty rates low?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I will answer the second part of your question as far as the program -- the second part of your question has to do with casualty rates. Of course every effort is being made by us to minimize United States casualties. They have run substantially lower, the lowest rate that they have for the last three years, and we will continue our efforts to minimize United States casualties.

As we turn over more and more of the combat responsibility to the South Vietnamese, our casualty figures will, of course, be affected.

As we move into Phase II of this program, I want to make it very clear that we still will maintain security forces with our support units that remain in Vietnam. These security units will not have combat responsibility in-country but they will have the security responsibility for our United States forces.

As far as the first part of your question, which dealt with the infiltration, I cannot make any projections as far as what the reaction will be by the North Vietnamese, and I do not want to interpret at this time whether the increase in infiltration is in the form of units being deployed in the South or whether the increase is merely to fill in vacancies and gaps in spaces that are a result of the enemy activity and combat activity during this last year. It is too soon to make that kind of an estimate.

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I can say, however, that on the basis of the present infiltration there is not a possibility in-country at this time to level a substantial attack against U. S. or South Vietnamese forces over a prolonged period of time. I am sure that you understand that the infiltration that we are talking about at the present time, to get down in the III and IV Corps area it would require possibly up to two months at least.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you talked this morning about a two-phased program and a two-pronged program. Have you dropped battlefield activity as one of the three criteria?

SECRETARY LAIRD: No, I have not dropped battlefield activity as one of the three criteria. I alluded to the fact that this was one of the areas that I will be looking into again in February on my trip. It is one of the areas that we watch on a constant basis every day I meet with the Vietnamese task force which we have on Vietnamization here in the Pentagon. I meet with them every morning. So if I have given that impression, I want to apologize to you for it.

The three criteria that will be used as far as troop reductions will continue to be progress in the negotiating front; two, progress in Vietnamization as far as military modernization of the forces of South Vietnam and, three, the level of combat activity carried on by the VC and the North Vietnamese.

In making my statement, and in enlarging upon the President's statement of last night, I did say that the reductions announced thus far, these three reductions were based primarily on one item -- that is the progress that we have made as far as the Vietnamization of the war is concerned, the progress we have made in turning over responsibilities to the South Vietnamese.

This is one of the cornerstones, of course, of our whole doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine outlined on Guam by President Nixon -- to turn over greater responsibility, particularly as far as ground forces are concerned, for the future security of Asia -- that this will be a responsibility of the Asians themselves and we will give them needed and necessary support in Vietnam. The Vietnamization program is the first move towards implementing that important new doctrine as far as the national security planning of the United States.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you give us any idea, even in general terms, either of what units or what groups or what individuals, even in general terms, will be included in this next group?

SECRETARY LAIRD: The announcement as to the units will be made immediately following the planning conference in Hawaii. I think it should be made very clear that this planning conference will move forward very early in January, and that announcement will be made by General Abrams.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, your trip out there to Vietnam will coincide with Tet, will it not, and is that deliberate?

SECRETARY LAIRD: It is not deliberate. We will be there during the particular period in which we have had increases in enemy activity in South Vietnam in the past. I will be there during that particular period for an on-the-ground survey of the situation.

I think you will realize that I had earlier planned to go to Vietnam in December. We thought that the Congress would be adjourned by that time and that my testimony on the Hill would have been completed, but I have been up on the Hill, as you know, quite regularly this month, so I was unable to go to Vietnam in December.

David Packard, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, did go to Vietnam and returned and made a report to all of you here in the building last week. The important aspects of this trip were, I think, reported in detail to you, but the February period is a very important period from the standpoint of the war in Vietnam, and I am sure that all of you realize the importance of the month of February.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you give us an estimate of the present troop strength of the Communists in Vietnam, compared to the troop strength a year ago?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I would rather do it this way in order to cause the minimum amount of difficulty as far as your reporting is concerned. We have tried to stay away from this figure business. It's like estimating infiltration or estimating troop strength -- it's not an easy task. I noticed that some of the reporters that reported on the October 15 moratorium here in Washington -- I read reports that there were 119,000 at the Washington Monument and then I read other reports there were 435,000. We actually had pictures of those people taken from above and there was a great variance in the estimates I noticed by the press in reporting exactly what the figures were.

So, when you get into this figure business, I've been deliberately trying to stay away from fixed figures. I would rather use ranges. I would estimate that the range of enemy presence in Vietnam is in the neighborhood of at least 40,000 below last year.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, is this primarily a result of the drop in infiltration, do you believe?

SECRETARY LAIRD: This is a result of certainly a drop in infiltration. As compared with 1968, there has been a decrease in infiltration. The primary factor involved in the decrease is, of course, battle casualties taken by the other side during calendar year 1969.

QUESTION: Is there a chance that all U.S. combat troops could be pulled out by the end of 1970 regardless of the Paris peace negotiations?

SECRETARY LAIRD: That is another "iffy" question. I would not say no that there wasn't a chance. I think you wouldn't expect me to say no, would you?

This is a matter, though, again that I hope that some of you will read over the testimony in which these very same questions were asked of me before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I answered them for seven hours and I think you will find we went into great detail on that very question. I tried to make it as clear as I could that we were not going to engage in putting out timetables as far as the Department of Defense was concerned.

If we're ordered to put them out, that is a different matter, but my recommendation to the President has been and continues to be that we announce our reductions on force levels and authorized troop strength in Vietnam on a four and never to exceed a six months basis. I believe this is most important, because we've had too many optimistic forecasts in the past coming from the Department of Defense and it's caused considerable problems as far as the credibility of this Department.

Since my first press conference in this room when we announced the fact that we would have regular open press briefings every morning, we've had more press conferences than any other Cabinet officer. We've tried to be as open and forthcoming as we possibly can, but we're not going to get into the business of making forecasts that are not possible of accomplishment.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, without getting into the numbers, would you anticipate that this latest increment of 50,000 to be brought down would find a majority leaving the country after the Tet offensive giving you maximum coverage during the period when you are trying to determine what the infiltration is?

SECRETARY LAIRD: Yes.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, what was the enemy troop strength a year ago?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I am not going to get into the question of those figures. I think I have indicated to you the figure that was used a year ago by the previous Administration -- I will have Dan make that available to you -- but I have indicated to you that there has been a decrease of at least 40,000. That's within the range and the portion of the range and I accept that particular figure at this time.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, do I understand you to say that the North Vietnamese and the VC do not have the capacity at this time to stage a major offensive for a long period? I think that's what you said.

SECRETARY LAIRD: That is correct.

QUESTION: Your reply to the Hill suggested that they have a potential for about a million to draw on for troops, and thus they have a considerable force in country and near the country. Why do you feel that they cannot sustain an offensive? What's your reasoning?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I don't know where you got that troop level figure.

QUESTION: It's the answer in the agate type in the back of the Senate hearings.

SECRETARY LAIRD: I think you are talking about a strength that has to do with the South Vietnamese forces, because I have never used a figure of one million in-country ---

QUESTION: Not in-country, to draw on from the north.

SECRETARY LAIRD: That's the total force available and part of their force is not only in the north, but part of their force is in Laos and I was talking about the capability at the present time in South Vietnam to launch a major, sustained offensive. I do not believe that they have the capability in-country, in being, at this time to launch such a major offensive. That was the answer to the question. You are now broadening this and taking forces that are in the north, in Laos and in other areas, and that is a different question than I addressed myself to earlier.

QUESTION: Do you rule that out as a possibility -- that they could use those forces?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I rule out the possibility that they could move those forces in-country during the particular period of time that we're discussing here through the 15th of April 1970, and have them in III and IV corps ready for such an activity.

When I was discussing the question asked earlier, the question dealt with this period, in this time frame, and my answer was that it would not be possible in that period of time. I don't want to give the impression that an attack can't be made by the forces of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. I am talking about a major, sustained offensive campaign.

QUESTION: Do you agree there are a million men under arms ---

SECRETARY LAIRD: Where did that voice come from?

QUESTION: Not from me, believe me.

SECRETARY LAIRD: It was rather pleasant though. I thought maybe someone else was going to take over.

I will tell you if Heather wants attention, she will have it right now.

QUESTION: Now if I could just think of a question.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, is the Administration contemplating any troop withdrawals from NATO?

SECRETARY LAIRD: In the 1970 budget we have funded all presently assigned combat troops for NATO throughout fiscal year 1970, and we will continue in the 1971 budget. We will make our request to the Congress based on the present combat strength in Europe at this time.

I want to make it very clear this will be the recommendation of the Executive Branch. As I made clear to the NATO Defense Planning Committee in Brussels the other day, this is a matter that is reviewed by a co-equal branch of this government, the Congress of the United States, but this will be our recommendation as far as the 1971 budget is concerned.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, would you give the average number of troops under the troop withdrawals that have been announced so far as having been 12,500 a month? Would you like to see them be considerably higher than that? Have you argued for a higher rate?

SECRETARY LAIRD: No, I'm in support of this program.

QUESTION: How would this most recently announced reduction, the one that the President announced yesterday, affect draft calls in 1970?

SECRETARY LAIRD: The programmed draft calls can be reduced in 1970 on the basis of this third increment reduction of forces in Vietnam.

QUESTION: Is there a factor that you use -- so many fewer per man?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I would like to say of this 50,000, a majority of the 50,000 spaces will be reduced as far as our end-strength is concerned. We will move to discharge a number of individuals from the military service based upon this third increment reduction from Vietnam. So, our end-strength will be reduced by almost 90 to 95 percent of the spaces that are in this third reduction in the ceiling.

Does that answer your question?

And this will have an effect upon our draft program for calendar year 1970. We now plan an end-strength of 3,235,000 men. We will reduce that almost 50,000. That will be worked out in the planning conference, but it will be about from 90 to 100 percent. I don't want to give you the exact figure because the planning conference, depending on some final decisions on certain units, will make some difference there. But I can predict that it will be around 95 percent.

QUESTION: That is the fiscal 1971 budget?

SECRETARY LAIRD: That will be the fiscal '70 budget, but you were talking about calendar year draft calls and I'm talking about the fiscal end-strength which is on June 30. Is there any confusion about that?

QUESTION: How will it affect the 250,000 draftee projections for calendar 1970?

SECRETARY LAIRD: The 250,000 draft call projection will be phased down. I would assume and this is being worked on at the present time, that there would be a possibility of a reduction in the area of around 10 percent. Those figures are being worked on at the present time, but there will be a reduction in the programmed draft calls for calendar year 1970.

I might add one thing about the draft, too, as long as I have this opportunity. The draft bill, of course, is one of the programs that I was very much interested in in this year 1969, and I consider it one of the major accomplishments of the Administration. But there are stories that have floated around that there is a loophole in this draft procedure.

I want it understood that you can't be exposed twice to the random selection process. You are only exposed once. I assured the congressional committees of this fact when I testified before the House and the Senate. So, the idea that you can move yourself into another lottery position by actions which you take is not the case.

The number which is selected for you is the number that stays with you all through your period of eligibility. The eligibility is for 12 months. If you choose to extend your period by a student deferment, you stay a constructive 19-year old but you keep the same number.

I think that should be understood because some young people have been misinformed by certain sources concerning this very important point. I think in planning for their future they should understand that very thoroughly.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, on another subject, could you comment for us in some detail today about a report that you are having differences with the State Department over whether the Army should use biological agents to produce poisonous toxins for military uses?

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SECRETARY LAIRD: There is no disagreement as far as the Department of State and the Department of Defense in this area. There is no disagreement between the President's Scientific Adviser and the Department of Defense in this area. We follow and we have all taken the position that toxins are in the field of chemical warfare. This is the position taken by the 14-Nation Commission that advised the Secretary General of the United Nations concerning chemical warfare and the whole field of biological agents. In that report to the Secretary General, which is the position which has been taken before the U.N., toxins are a chemical agent.

It should be pointed out, I think, that this whole program is under review. The chemical warfare and biological research study that was ordered by the President was ordered at my request, and I believe it is one of the most substantial studies that has been undertaken by the Security Council, and one of the most important. I would like to point out that no such study had been undertaken since 1958, except by the committee on which I served in the Congress, which undertook such a study in 1964. The Executive Branch of our government had not undertaken such a study since 1958, but there is no disagreement.

Now, as far as the interpretation of the U.K. Convention, that is a matter that we will consider separately when we get into negotiations and not before negotiations.

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can I ask one question to clarify your answer to an earlier question. It is a very important point.

SECRETARY LAIRD: I don't want to break you off but I think we have really had enough, but go ahead.

QUESTION: The one point is in answer to your question about whether it is possible that all combat troops might be taken out of Vietnam by the end of 1970, your answer seemed to be partially facetious and I would really like to understand whether you do still consider that a serious possibility?

SECRETARY LAIRD: I just want to make it very clear that I will not engage in putting out any timetables as far as troop reductions are concerned. We have our timetable; we have a plan approved by the President of the United States, and those announcements will be made by the President of the United States. I don't know how I can state that anymore firmly or any stronger than I have, not only here but in my testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. They are good at asking questions and I made it very clear that as far as the timetable was concerned, I did not believe and I did not recommend to the President a timetable being announced in advance. These announcements will be made by the President from time to time based upon the progress which we make.

THE PRESS: Thank you, sir.

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(11:17 A.M. EST)