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TRANSCRIPT OF DEFENSE SECRETARY LAIRD'S NEWS CONFERENCE WASHINGTON, D. C., TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1970

(Secretary Laird) Ladies and gentlemen, when I left for the Defense Planning Committee meeting in Brussels and for the NATO Council meeting I indicated that I would come down and report to you on those meetings.

I have a few brief comments to make and I will give you a two-page statement which I used in briefing the staff meeting at the Pentagon, which I thought might be of interest to you.

I believe that the NATO meeting in Brussels this month was perhaps the most important of the NATO meetings in many years. I have had an opportunity to be involved with the Alliance as a member of Congress and now, for the past two years, as Secretary of Defense.

I particularly want to express my appreciation to Minister Den Toom and Minister Schmidt for the work that they did in establishing the new NATO improvement program; also, the work that was done by the Secretary General who came up and encouraged the NATO allies to make a new movement towards greater sharing of the military and financial burdens of the Alliance during the next five-year program.

I think that the actions that were taken express a new spirit as far as NATO is concerned. This is recognized in the heightened interest of the European allies, in the realities which we face here in the United States. The realities of the 1970's which press upon us are the manpower reality, the fiscal reality, the strategic reality and political reality.

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AMERICAN EMBASSY - TOKYO

The decision which they made to go forward with this first step towards increased sharing of the burden as far as the Europeans are concerned, I think, was indeed most heartening. This is the first action in this direction to improve forces and to more adequately share the burden of the Alliance in the last 10 or 12 years.

I think that this movement in this direction is significant. It should be recognized as such and I know the Secretary of State shares with me, as well as the entire Administration, the importance of the movement which was initiated by the Europeans themselves. We have for a long time stressed in this Administration the importance of consultation and discussions. And I think that this type of consultation and discussion process which has been carried on during the last two years has been helpful to the Alliance and does make it possible for us to maintain not only the strategic nuclear deterrent, which is so important as far as the Alliance is concerned, the tactical nuclear deterrent, which is important, but places an increased stress on the importance during the 1970's of the conventional deterrent as far as the Alliance is concerned.

I also wanted to announce today that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I will be going to Southeast Asia early in January. We will leave here on the 5th of January for meetings in Paris with our negotiators, Ambassadors Bruce and Habib, and Lieutenant General Ewell. From Paris, we will go to Thailand and then into South Vietnam.

The purpose of this visit is to assess the progress of the Vietnamization Program; to assess the military situation in Southeast Asia; to assess the military assistance programs; and also to confer with General Abrams on what lies ahead as far as further troop reductions and an on-the-ground assessment of the military situation in Southeast Asia.

The third announcement that I would like to make is that on Thursday, Dec. 17 at 11 o'clock, Roger Kelley, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, will be here to brief you on a new memorandum which I have signed, which places into effect a new Equal Opportunities Program for the Department of Defense.

This Equal Opportunity Program has several new aspects to it, and if you can take the time to spend 35 to 45 minutes with Roger Kelly tomorrow here in this room, he will give a detailed briefing on the new Equal Opportunities Program which will govern the civilian and military manpower problems as far as the Department of Defense and also contract personnel problems.

Fourth, during the past year, we have been going forward on our review of the method in which to dispose of our biological weapons. As you know, one of the first requests that I made of the National Security Council and the new Administration was to review completely our biological research programs and our chemical warfare programs. As a member of the Congress, I had felt for a long time that such a review was needed and necessary, and such a review had not been made at the highest levels of our Government since the late 1950s.

A new program has been established, and we have been going forward with the initiatives that are necessary to place this new program into operation. We will be announcing the plans by which the destruction of biological agents and toxin weapons which have been produced prior to the time that I became Secretary of Defense. This destruction program will go forward and has now been coordinated in the various agencies of the Government, and we will have a briefing on the destruction program within the next week. I don't intend to get into the details of the program as it has been finalized as far as the destruction of the biological and toxin weapons, but that program will go forward and has been fully coordinated and it is ready to move now. As you know, we will only retain a minimum defensive research program in the biological area.

The fifth item, before we get into questions, that I would like to comment on is to express my gratification over the action which was taken by the House Appropriations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee approving the military assistance and aid requests which were placed before this recess session of the Congress. We anticipate with the action which we hope will be taken in the Senate today that we will have had complete success on this request which the Secretary of State and I have presented to these committees. And we are delighted at the overwhelming support which our testimony received and the enthusiastic response by the Congress; yesterday's unanimous vote of the appropriation measure was indeed a rather historic first as far as military assistance or aid programs. We do want to express our appreciation for the response which this request of the President received in the Senate and in the House of Representatives.

Gentlemen, I would be glad to answer any questions.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, while you are on this trip around the world, will there be a sort of standstill on troop withdrawals pending your assessment?

(The Secretary) We have gone forward with the fifth increment of the troop reduction. As I told you here in this room when the fifth increment was announced, that we would meet or beat the 344,000, we have done that. We have beaten the target as we have done on every announcement that we have made on reductions. Today we have withdrawn over 200,000 men from Vietnam and this has been because of the progress of our Vietnamization Program.

The sixth increment will move forward. A planning conference will be held on the fourth of January in Hawaii and the plans for the reduction to 284,000 by May 1 will be formulated, the transportation, the support plans for that sixth increment will be finalized at the troop withdrawal conference on January 4.

We will be, of course, below the 340,000 prior to the time the planning conference takes place. Our troop ceiling today, as of December 31, is 344,000. But we will be below 340,000 -- the time that that planning conference takes place. Their responsibility will be to finalize the plans to get down to the May 1 troop ceiling.

I can assure you that we will meet or beat the troop ceiling of May 1. We have never engaged in monthly figures. And I don't intend to set monthly troop ceilings, so that's the way we will leave that.

(Question) Do you see anything developing militarily in Vietnam -- either North Vietnam or related areas -- that threatens this particular planning for the troop reductions by May 1?

(The Secretary) There is nothing developing militarily that would cause us not to meet or beat the May 1 troop announcement.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, could you give us an estimate of the military situation, the order of battle in South Vietnam and what the rates of infiltration have been over the last six months, currently?

(The Secretary) The rates of infiltration for this year will be somewhat below the rates of infiltration for last year. The rate of infiltration in November this year was higher than the rate of infiltration for November of last year. The rate of infiltration this month is running slightly below December of a year ago. I do not get into specific figures in this area, but that is the general level as far as infiltration is concerned.

Major activities which are being carried on by the North Vietnamese as far as military actions are confined to a large extent to Laos and Cambodia at the present time.

(Question) Could you say something about Son Tay, with regard to the CIA? Mr. Helms has said one thing; you have said another thing.

(The Secretary) I don't believe that your question is based on any fact. If you will ask me a question about my association with the CIA, I would be glad to answer it. But as far as your quoting Mr. Helms, I don't believe there is any quote that could be attributed to him.

(Question) Without using a quote from him, could you give us a quick look at the timetable as to when you first consulted them, what their response was at that time and then again just before the raid, was there consultation, was there approval and so on just before the raid?

(The Secretary) First, in regard to the last part of your question, the responsibility for the approval and recommendations to the President of the United States is my responsibility. I made the recommendation to the President of the United States and also recommended the planning timetable as far as the Son Tay search and rescue mission is concerned. I think it should be understood that in making this recommendation, I drew upon all elements of our intelligence community and on every other asset that was available to me as Secretary of Defense.

As far as the first discussions with the Central Intelligence Agency, I believe that they run back into some time in May. As far as the continuing recognition of their capabilities, their advice, their input, it was a continuing thing that ran right through until the day that the search and rescue mission was carried out.

I well remember sitting in my office with the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency as we waited for the helicopters to take off at Son Tay; as we waited for them to cross the border; as we waited for our first reports as to whether or not POW's had been rescued at Son Tay. I can well remember listening to the clock tick as we waited for those messages.

I do not pass the responsibility for the decision in improving the planning or in recommending to the President the execution to anyone. It is my responsibility under the National Security Act of 1958 to make such recommendations to the Commander-in-Chief. I can assure you that there was continuing consultation and the assets of all agencies of our Government were drawn upon

all along the way as far as the search and rescue mission is concerned at Son Tay.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, Senator Griffin has proposed release of a certain number of prisoners in South Vietnam, also the wounded and injured. Is this proposal under consideration and has any decision been made or can we expect one?

(The Secretary) I support the proposal of Senator Griffin. I believe that it has considerable merit. And I certainly will do what I can to encourage this proposal.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, to go back to NATO a minute, you were enthusiastic about what the allies are proposing to do. How much of the 1.5 billion dollars annual balance of payments loss that NATO is costing us will this make up in your estimate?

(The Secretary) As far as the total cost of the United States forces and United States troops, as well as ground troops, air and naval forces, our cost will increase, not decrease, as far as NATO is concerned. This is true because of the increase in personnel costs that have come about because of pay increases and because of the increased costs as far as procurement of the supplies that are needed and necessary to maintain our forces in Europe.

This does not have the same related effect, however, on the balance of payments, but the balance of payments problem will remain about the same. These increases will be reflected not in the balance of payments, but they will be reflected as far as our budget is concerned because of increased costs.

We will maintain, however, our military capabilities in NATO and we expect to submit that kind of a budget to the Congress this January. I think the budget submission is the first week in February.

(Question) Are you convinced that Vietnamization is going to work out so that we will not have to leave large numbers of American troops in Vietnam indefinitely?

(The Secretary) Yes, I am.

(Question) To get back to Son Tay, you said you were in consultation with the CIA throughout this thing. Did at any time the CIA advise you that there was a possibility that prisoners might not be there?

(The Secretary) The situation was always such that we could not judge whether prisoners were in the cells with any degree of certainty. This was a matter that was always a risk. It was a risk associated with the entire mission, but in answer to the direct question which you pose, the answer would of course be "no."

(Question) We have heard a lot of talk and there has been some speculation by the columnists regarding a return to the cold war, particularly related to Europe and to the Middle East. I would like to know if the activities of the Soviet Union in the Middle East have hardened our own attitude toward the Soviet Union. And whether the Middle East activities of the Soviet Union have caused any concern among our NATO allies regarding Soviet intentions.

(The Secretary) The answer is they have caused some concern. There have been certain actions taken by the Soviet Union, not only as far as the Middle East is concerned, but as far as Berlin, as far as the Mediterranean, as far as the Caribbean, that I do believe are somewhat related to the negotiations which are currently going on in all of these areas.

(Question) The President in his last news conference issued some warnings to the North Vietnamese about what the United States would do if they attacked our troops withdrawing from Vietnam. Can you give us some idea of the military steps that are being taken to back up those words?

(The Secretary) It's always been evident, I think, that the understandings as we envisioned those understandings were violated by the North Vietnamese, certain actions would be taken by us.

I would like to just repeat, and if I could read this -- I have made a number of statements on this subject which I think have pointed up my hopes for successful negotiations in Paris and for adherence with the understandings that were reached when the bombing was stopped. But since you asked, let me give you this added thought. It would be my view that "If the good faith which was attached to Hanoi's effort to get substantive talks, disintegrates or disappears, and if it is ascertained that they are not proceeding in good faith in their negotiations and that efforts are being made to violate the good faith understandings with movements of the one kind or another, then that decision could be made."

And that decision that could be made refers to the question being asked, could bombing be resumed to the North?

This statement was made on October 31, 1968, under a practice that was carried on here in the Department of Defense under the previous Administration, which quotes Defense Department officials. These are the same Defense Department officials that are standing right here now, except I don't go for the backgrounders. I think you understand that I have not carried on that practice.

I will hand you a copy of this statement as you leave, so that you can see that since October 31, 1968, there has been no misunderstanding in this building and there should be no misunderstanding on the part of any reporter that listened to that backgrounder on October 31 of 1968. And I wish that you would read that statement carefully, gentlemen, in response to the question on bombing of the North.

(Question) Has your office issued any kind of restrictions as to what personnel that took part in the Son Tay mission can talk to the press about the mission?

(The Secretary) I think that any of you that were with me when we went to Fort Bragg had a very free afternoon in the discussion regarding the Son Tay search and rescue mission. If there was any inhibition on the part of any of the people that took part in the raid, I would like to know about it.

I do not believe that continued discussion, however -- I am glad to answer your questions, but I am willing to go forward with this kind of an operation in the future, if time and circumstances and the opportunity presents itself. That's all I care to say about it. I do not believe any further discussions on how we prepare for such an operation in the future would serve a useful purpose.

(Question) In discussing NATO, you've only used the military capabilities or force capabilities.

(The Secretary) I have always felt that that's the important thing by which you judge a deterrent, the capabilities of the deterrent. I have in my statements to the Congress always followed that line. We are increasing our capabilities as far as NATO is concerned, from 1967 to 1968, even in 1966; we are moving the people in and out of the NATO force structure in a rather rapid fashion. As a member of Congress, I was critical of the combat effectiveness of our forces in Europe and felt that their capabilities were not

as they should be. I can report to you today that our military capabilities in Europe are improving.

(Question) What I was going to ask, sir, was in connection with the latest burden-sharing arrangement, can we safely assume that by maintaining or increasing military capabilities, as you put it, this will require that the same number, substantially the same number of troops within, say two or three thousand, American troops will be kept in Europe?

(The Secretary) I think it's important not to get tied to a given figure. We have a troop ceiling in Europe; the number of billets, spaces, are in the neighborhood of 315,000 to 320,000, in that general area, the military spaces as far as NATO forces.

We do not operate at the troop ceiling. Every billet or every space is not filled. From time to time, there are lower figures. The approximate figure averages out at very close to 300,000. I don't want to get into this business of actual count of spaces filled and authorized spaces, because you're always going to have a variance there. Some people that don't cover this building and aren't familiar with the difference between spaces assigned and troop ceilings and actual counts sometimes get the two confused. And I don't think we want to lead to that kind of a problem.

(Question) On that point, what is the mission of the American troops in NATO? Is it to hold the line for a temporary period? Is it to win the war over there and are you irrevocably committed for several years on keeping the level around 300,000 in the face of the Mansfield proposals and others?

(The Secretary) The situation is such that we are following a strategy of developing and maintaining a conventional deterrent, as far as NATO is concerned. It is important, I believe, that as we move to the direction of sufficiency or parity in the tactical nuclear field and in the strategic nuclear field that the importance of the conventional deterrent increases. We will maintain this conventional deterrent and improve it. The only thing that could change our position is, of course, the unwillingness of our allies to improve and maintain their forces or a movement towards an agreement on mutual and balanced force reductions.

(Question) May I ask one more question about the bombing? As you know, the President said the other night that if the North Vietnamese develop a capacity and proceed to use that capacity to increase the level of fighting, then he would alter the bombing. Are they developing a capacity or have they

made any attempt to use such a capacity to increase the level of fighting?

(The Secretary) They have not increased the level of fighting, as far as Vietnam is concerned. There is some misunderstanding on the part of some people I know in the Congress from the questions that were asked the other day. I had a feeling that people think the war in Southeast Asia and in Vietnam has been escalated. Just the opposite is true. We've withdrawn 200,000 men from the area, American men. We have cut the number of sorties this year as compared with last year. If you take November of 1970 and compare it with November of 1969, our sortie rate is substantially reduced, very substantially reduced.

So, the level of effort and the military activity as far as Southeast Asia is concerned is at a lower level this year than it was last year. We are truly deescalating the war and disengaging as far as Americans are concerned.

(Question) Regarding your appearances before the Foreign Relations Committee, you have been advised according to news reports to smile more and not to smile at all. Have you determined which is proper?

(The Secretary) I saw that news report. I think that that news report referred to earlier testimony when I was testifying on the strategic weapon balance between the Soviet Union and the United States.

I will try to carry on the best I can and smile when I should and not smile when I shouldn't, but I have to make that judgment. I don't think anybody else can make it for me. (Laughter)

(Question) If the Vietnamization Program continues toward successful conclusion and in the absence of a political settlement in Paris, what kind of options do you see left for getting the release of the prisoners in North Vietnam?

(The Secretary) This will have a very important effect upon our Vietnamization Program, because we are going to maintain a United States presence until a satisfactory solution can be worked out for the prisoners of war.

I am hopeful that negotiations will be the route that we can follow and that we will be successful with negotiations because this is the way to have a complete and total withdrawal of American forces coupled with a satisfactory solution to the prisoner of war problem.

We will continue to make a maximum effort in this area. I spent this morning with Ambassador Habib before I came here to this press conference. I will be meeting with Ambassador Bruce, and Ambassador Habib and General Ewell in Paris on the fifth of January. This, I think, shows the importance that we in the Department of Defense attach to the negotiations.

(Question) At the time of the bombing strikes in the North, we were told that no ordnance was used north of the 19th parallel. And as the Son Tay story developed, it turns out that this does not seem to be the case.

(The Secretary) I don't know who told you that. I know that I was quoted as saying that on the diversionary flight there was no bombing mission involved. I stood here when General Manor said that the amount of ordnance was a minimum amount of ordnance in connection with the Son Tay raid.

So that the record can be very clear in this area, the Navy diversionary flight which was not a bombing mission, the mission of the Navy diversionary flight along the coast of North Vietnam was not a bombing mission. It was not a mission in connection with the dropping of ordnance. It was assigned the sole responsibility to drop flares as a diversionary effort. These pilots have the authority of self-defense when radars lock in on these diversionary flights of naval aircraft in connection with the Son Tay search and rescue mission; these pilots when they were locked on by ground radar and when SAM missiles were being fired and in preparation for such firings did expend three Shrike missiles after being locked on by North Vietnamese SAM radar.

Just so there can be no misunderstanding, I told the Senate Armed Services Committee in the first briefing that there were 12 to 14 Shrike missiles fired. I have since corrected that record and the total number of Shrikes fired, even by the planes that were actually in the operation and not part of the diversionary, 3 plus 8, a total of 11 Shrike missiles.

(Question) You have quoted here the October 31, 1968, backgrounder here at the Pentagon in connection with the halt in the bombing in which it was stated, if I heard you correctly, that the question of good faith at Paris was the crucial factor and that the other side did not exhibit good faith.

(The Secretary) If substantive talks did not result. I will give you a copy of it, just to refresh your memory. I am sure you were here.

(Question) My question really is this: By quoting that are you suggesting that this is now the policy of this Administration, that if good faith does not appear in the Paris negotiations --

(The Secretary) No, my point is that calling this to your attention, and I know that most of you in this room don't need to have it called to your attention, is that there has been no basic change in policy.

(Question) If you say, Mr. Secretary, that there will be a U.S. military presence in South Vietnam until there is a satisfactory resolution of the prisoner issue and that must be by negotiation, are you saying that there will be no total withdrawal of American forces except by a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam?

(The Secretary) No, I am not saying that at all. I am saying that until the prisoners are released, there will be no total and complete withdrawal of American presence in Vietnam; that the way to have total and complete withdrawal of Americans in Vietnam, the fastest, most rapid way is, of course, the negotiation route. In October, the President of the United States laid this before the negotiators in Paris as one of the five basic points for peace in Southeast Asia.

(Question) Then the only absolute point that must be negotiated is prisoners.

(The Secretary) There can be a release, and I would hope that the North Vietnamese would release their prisoners and I can assure you that we stand ready to encourage the South Vietnamese to release all of the North Vietnamese prisoners.

This was the proposal that was placed before the Paris negotiators just last week. It did not receive a favorable response. But I can assure you that we have not stopped in this area and we will continue to push forward.

(Question) Back to NATO for a second, with the reduction of general purpose forces in the United States progressing, do you think that the present level of United States forces in Europe can be maintained beyond 1972-1973 or must there be a certain ratio between the number of divisions stationed on the United States mainland and abroad?

(The Secretary) As far as stationing forces in mainland United States and pre-positioning equipment in Europe, this is not the best type of military investment, as far as the Department of Defense. As a matter of fact, it is more expensive for us to follow that procedure than the procedure that we will recommend in the 1972 budget.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, do you feel that Hanoi got the better part of the bargain in the 1968 bombing halt understanding?

(The Secretary) I have not gotten into a discussion of whether the decision in 1965 was the proper decision to put Americans on the ground in Vietnam. I have not looked backwards as to whether the understandings of 1968 were to the best interest of the United States or not. I do not believe it does us any good in this year, 1970, to look backwards to the decision of '68 or the decision of 1965.

I have tried to carry on the operations of this Department and have been a voice in the Administration which has tried to remove Americans from Vietnam and do what we can to live by the understanding as we understand it that was arrived at in 1968 as far as the bombing halt is concerned. We have made it evident to the other side the actions that we will take from time to time, if it is thought that those understandings have been violated.
