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# GIs' Viet Combat Role to End By Mid-1971, Laird Asserts

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PARIS (AP) — Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird flew to Southeast Asia Wednesday after heaping praise on the Vietnamization program and declaring it will permit the end of an active U.S. combat role in South Vietnam by the middle of next summer.

American forces in South Vietnam will be cut from a ceiling figure of 549,500 in January, 1969, to less than 284,000 May 1,

Laird said. He did not give a timetable for further reductions, but he did say that after the summer American troops remaining will have only a "security mission" and no longer a combat task.

"We will be in a position . . . where the American combat responsibility will be removed as far as South Vietnam is concerned," he said.

U.S. forces, Laird told a news conference, will be assigned to logistics support, and will give air and artillery help to the South Vietnamese.

He said the Vietnamization program had made "substantial progress" and that South Vietnamese forces are "much better equipped, much better trained and leadership has improved to the point where they are able to take over the military burden. . ."

Laird did not say what American forces would do after the summer if their bases came under Viet Cong or North Vietnamese attack, but an aide said "We will always have American troops protecting the remaining forces."

Thus it was made clear that U.S. troops may still be engaged

in combat, at least in a defensive posture.

Laird also said, in underscoring the "Nixon Doctrine" of turning more defense responsibility over to American allies in the Pacific area, that by July 1 American presence will be cut by over 320,000 men. This will include 265,000 in South Vietnam, 12,000 in Japan, 20,000 in South Korea, 16,000 in Thailand, 5,000 in Okinawa and 6,000 in the Philippines.

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