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SPECIAL REPORT

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PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF DEFENSE SECRETARY LAIRD'S NEWS CONFERENCE WASHINGTON, D. C., WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 1970

(Question) ... you're the first high level official I've had a chance to ask, what exactly the import of the Vice President's remarks would mean to your responsibility for Cambodia, that we're going to do everything we can to help the Lon Nol Government and also if Cambodia were to become Communist the implication was that it would impair our Vietnamization Program. Do you agree with that?

(Secretary Laird) I have no difficulty with it at all, Bill. It's exactly what I've said right along. I've tried to point out that the existence of logistic supplies, military personnel in Cambodia, easy access to the forces in South Vietnam, does have a significant effect upon our military operations, the level of our casualties, progress with troop withdrawal, progress in Vietnamization as far as South Vietnam is concerned.

I have read over with interest the discussion that took place down here yesterday, and I don't care to get into a debate over the semantics of what our air power is doing in Cambodia. I made it clear, I thought, and I know that you're not supposed to use that term, but I use it, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that the limitation as far as our ground forces did not apply to our air power in Cambodia.

What I've tried to do, having the responsibility for issuing the operating orders in the field, is to do everything possible to reduce American casualties in Vietnam. The use of air power to interdict or to stop -- other terms if you want to use them -- materiel, personnel in Cambodia is a good use of military power in that area with the minimum possible American loss of life. I'm interested in keeping American casualties down. If we can destroy enemy

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supplies, destroy enemy troops in Cambodia with a minimum American casualty rate, I'm for it and I will authorize it.

The situation is such that tomorrow in Saigon there will be announced the lowest casualty figure for any week since some time in 1966 -- almost four years. I was disturbed this morning to have a difficult situation last night in Vietnam where we had a helicopter with heavy personnel load which was downed by enemy gunfire. Enemy gunfire is something that's being checked out at the present time, but we believe that it was enemy gunfire and this is a matter that will be checked out and the final details of this will be announced, of course, in Saigon after these checks have been run. This was up in the I Corps area, and when you have this kind of an accident it does concern me because in one situation, you lose almost as many lives, almost half as many as we lost all of last week.

We've been able to reduce casualties. They're less than half of what they were last year and the first quarters of this year and a third of what they were two years ago. As Secretary of Defense I will continue to keep the maximum pressure on the reduction of American casualties in Southeast Asia. I believe this use of air power in Cambodia, which is coordinated with the Cambodian Government, is a good use of U. S. military assets in that area, and it is part of the program which I believe is so important to keep American casualties at a very low rate.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, does this mean that if the enemy continues to operate in Cambodia and expose himself to our air power, that we'd be just as glad to kill them there or prefer to kill them there, as in South Vietnam?

(The Secretary) You can put it the way you want to put it. That isn't the way I would put it, because I would put it a little differently. I'm interested in this military action that is going on in Southeast Asia being conducted to minimize American casualties. As Secretary of Defense, I've been making every effort that I can make to minimize and to reduce American casualties. One casualty, as far as an American service personnel, is a high casualty to me. I'm going to use the assets that are available to this Department to minimize those casualties of Americans whom I feel I have some responsibility to them than anyone else in this Government, except the Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States. So I would rather put it in those terms.

(Question) What is our involvement and what is our commitment to either a Lon Nol Government or any other neutral or friendly regime in that area?

(The Secretary) Our commitment is to a neutral government in Cambodia and that commitment has not changed.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, suppose the Cambodians continue to have difficulty with the North Vietnamese after the bulk of the Vietnamization Program is completed, do you think our air power would continue in support of operations over there?

(The Secretary) After the bulk of Americans? I would think in that period of time that there are efforts being made through military assistance and through application of the Nixon Doctrine to build up the nations of Southeast Asia so that they are in the position to help themselves. This includes not only ground support in the form of military assistance, but also the improvement of their air power and their air capability. We're going forward very well on that program, Phase II of Vietnamization, as far as South Vietnam is concerned, is going along hand-in-hand with Phase I, and I'd like to get back into that discussion but you've heard me talk about it so many times down here, I don't want to wear out my welcome today; I want to make the point if I could that we do have programs in the field of military assistance which take care of the problem that you discussed.

(Question) Does what you said earlier mean that there has been an easing of previously stated but unspecified geographical limitations of bombing in Cambodia?

(The Secretary) That isn't what I meant. I don't think we've ever discussed those operational orders as such down here or made them public. There are certain restrictions that have been placed in the operational orders which do exist. It isn't complete freedom of action on the part of MACV. There are restrictions which have been written into the operating orders as far as the use of air power in Cambodia.

(Question) Sir, the missile range in the Pacific -- the impact range which the Russians had for about a month -- closed yesterday. Do you have anything to tell us as to what they accomplished in these recent tests and whether you feel the tests indicate a sizeable gain to them?

(The Secretary) I have the test data with me on the testing that has gone forward; we've had surface ships in the area and did observe certain of these tests. I guess I didn't bring it with me. I had just been looking at it. That's why I thought I had brought it with me, but the Soviet Union did go forward with testing of SS-11s this past week.

(Question) This past week? Last week?

(The Secretary) Last week. The ships I think are coming out of the area right now but --

(Question) This more than the initial...

(The Secretary) Yes.

(Mr. Henkin) There were two tests on one day of the SS-11s, on the 21st.

(The Secretary) I think we informed you on the 31st of July about some SS-11 testing, SS-13 and SS-9 testing.

(Mr. Henkin) One on the 27th and one on the 28th.

(Question) I don't remember you telling us about any SS-9s.

(The Secretary) No, 11.

I talked about the SS-9 FOBS, the SS-9 which was in almost complete orbit of the earth and I believe we made the announcement on that here. That's an SS-9 vehicle. The SS-11s last week -- there were three objects impacting into the Pacific test area. These are the first multiple reentry vehicles on the SS-11 system. We've already announced in the past the multiple vehicles, the multiple reentry of SS-9s weaponry.

This is the first announcement I think that we have made of SS-11s. Both of the flights were made on August 21.

(Question) They each had three vehicles?

(The Secretary) U. S. ships in the target area reported that each of these tests, three objects impacted into the Pacific Ocean.

Beyond this I can give you no other details on the tests.

(Question) You mentioned the SS-13.

(The Secretary) No, this is the total test program, SS-9, SS-11, SS-13. The new tests of this past week have been SS-11.

(Question) (Inaudible) tested in that area at all, sir?

(Mr. Henkin) I was checking into that, and the answer is yes.

(The Secretary) We have not announced this, and I don't know just how far we want to go today.

(Mr. Henkin) This is the first time I've gone further than you. Let me enjoy myself.

(The Secretary) The answer to your question is the momentum of the Soviet test program is still going forward. The new tests that I refer to, on the SS-11. I think the significance of those tests were that there were three objects that impacted into the Pacific.

(Question) Can you tell us anything about them? Their nature, or were they similar to the SS-9? Do they fall into a pattern of resembling our Minuteman?

(The Secretary) This is a matter that we're studying at the present time.

(Question) What's the significance beyond that of the SS-11 as opposed to the -9? What do you see beyond MIRV-ing the 11? What is the significance of that period?

(The Secretary) The significance, of course, of the testing is that this date that I had given you on the deployment of 1972 in this area certainly is still a very realistic projection and can easily be met by the Soviet Union. In my posture statement to the Congress, some people took issue with that projection, but I think that this confirms that the Soviet Union will have that capability.

(Question) These are 11s?

(The Secretary) I also talked about the capability of MIRVs by the Soviet Union in 1972, and I did not limit that to the 9's in the posture statement.

(Question) Could you say from what you learned whether these were MIRV instead of MRV?

(The Secretary) No, I don't get into that discussion. Even on the SS-9s I never said that either way they do have the capability, however, of being used against certainly Minuteman weapons systems. That can be proven by the tests they conducted in the Pacific as far as the SS-9s are concerned. Now, on the SS-11s, we're checking this matter out now and I would not care to make any projection or forecast on that?

(Question) Mr. Secretary, is this a budget consideration? They have a large number of SS-11 launchers and now they just put a new warhead on these instead of building a whole new system.

(The Secretary) It could be. It could be a program like we have in the Minuteman III field.

(Question) But this does accelerate their offensive capability. How much does this increase their offensive capability?

(The Secretary) If they deploy this kind of an object and it does have three weapons, it would accelerate their number of targetable warheads by three, in the SS-11 area. We know that in the SS-11 area they have well over 700 SS-11s in being, you can multiply it out.

(Question) Do you see this as basically an attempt by them to overwhelm an ABM system, or is that the principal significance of it as you see it on why they would be doing it?

(The Secretary) I don't want to read into this just one strategic consideration, but this is one that would certainly be considered by them.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, do you have any idea of the megatonnage of the SS-11 multiple warhead?

(The Secretary) No, I do not. I can only tell you about the impact of three objects into the Pacific Ocean in these recent tests. As far as the megatonnage of the warheads, should they be nuclear warheads, I cannot answer that. We've estimated, as you know, at various times megatonnage of the SS-9 and the SS-11, but if this new system should be three targetable warheads, I do not have an estimate as to their megatonnage.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, can you confirm for us reports which are now circulating that a rather large increase of troops along the Sino-Soviet border, on both sides and that things are getting rather tense?

(The Secretary) There have been increases in troops along the Sino-Soviet border, on both sides, within the last 12 months.

(Question) On the scale of 40 divisions?

(The Secretary) I don't care to get into the number of divisions, but it's a substantial deployment of troops on both sides.

(Question) Could you discuss the difficulties which cropped up yesterday in talks between Vice President Agnew and President Park?

(The Secretary) A decision has been made to withdraw approximately 20,000 troops from Korea. This decision has been communicated to the Korean Government. It was discussed by the Vice President. The decision to transfer some U.S. Air Force F-4s to bases in Korea the latter part of this fiscal year or early in the next fiscal year to give greater air capability in Korea has also been communicated to the South Koreans. This was done by Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard at the meeting of the defense ministers in Hawaii.

As far as the modernization of Korean forces, that is a continuing program and one that I'm very much interested in and this will require planning over the next five years, but this modernization program is not directly related to the F-4 change or is it related to our decision to reduce our ground presence in Korea. The F-4 decision and the ground presence decisions are tied together.

(Question) Given the priorities and the squeeze in Congress, do you think the \$3 billion military assistance program is feasible in five years for South Korea? That's the figure that's been used as what they put forward.

(The Secretary) The answer to your question would be no.

(Question) It's not realistic?

(The Secretary) Three billion dollars -- considering the attitudes in the Congress, I would say no.

(Question) Could you discuss an AP report out of Saigon that you are reducing bases or have plans to reduce bases, specifically Tuy Hoa and Takhli?

(The Secretary) No, I don't care to comment on that. We are looking over not only our bases in the United States but also our bases worldwide in the reviews that are currently going on and I wouldn't want to comment on those because you're going to have all sorts of reports for the next three to four months while this review continues to go forward. I don't think we can keep up with all those rumors and all those reports that you're going to have to contend with on an almost daily basis.

(Question) Could you give us an up-to-date discussion on the military situation in Cambodia, particularly if Communist forces have moved back into the sanctuary areas, how much territory do the Communists control in Cambodia, etc., and at the same time can you link any decrease in casualties in Vietnam to the Cambodian operations?

(The Secretary) First, ⁽¹⁾ you can associate a reduction in casualties particularly the III and IV Corps area, with the inability of the enemy to use the sanctuary areas on a hit and run basis and this has been significant, particularly in the III and IV Corps area. Secondly, ⁽²⁾ the level of North Vietnamese and VC activity in Cambodia has not significantly changed for the last three to four weeks. There continues to be movements of military equipment, military supplies and foodstuffs from North Vietnam through Laos, down into Cambodia, using certain highway routes and certain river routes in an effort to supply the North Vietnamese and VC in Cambodia. They are having difficulties, however, in carrying on these operations in Cambodia and Laos and South Vietnam at the same time.

One should not underestimate the difficulty that the enemy does face in carrying on the logistic support of his troops in these three areas at the same time. This has had an effect upon the level of fighting in Vietnam and this is what I watch on a constant basis. The only real attacks have been in the I Corps area. Our casualties, certainly this week, with the accident of last night, are almost entirely in that area. The casualties are lower because the enemy has not been able to stage a significant action in Vietnam and I do attribute that to taking the sanctuary areas away from him in the III and IV Corps.

(Question) To what do you attribute the low casualties from last October up to last April, except for a couple of high points?

(The Secretary) We've had a considerable effort made, as you know, to reduce casualties. I have told you on many occasions that every effort has been made by this Department, by MACV, by the Air Force and by the Army to reduce American casualties. We have some accidents. Undoubtedly, human nature being what it is, we reduce our guard from time to time when it probably shouldn't be down, particularly that reported this morning. When you have a bad one like that, it brings that home.

Every effort is going to be made to keep the pressure on at all levels of the command to continue to do what we can to reduce casualties, and I think we've tried to do that in the last year, but the question relating to Cambodia, I think that this has had a significant effect in III and IV Corps. It has not had that great an effect in I Corps, of course, because you have a shorter logistic supply route up there. . .
