Pentagon Admits Using Rainmaking in Vietnam

Clandestine Program of 1967-72 Falsified in Reports, Senate Testimony Reveals

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. Air Force conducted clandestine rainmaking operations over Indochina from 1967 to 1972 and falsified reports about it as it did in the secret 1969-70 bombing of Cambodia, a Senate committee said Saturday.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee released the transcript of a closed-door hearing on March 20 at which the Defense Department officially acknowledged for the first time that it had used rainmaking as an offensive weapon in the Vietnam war.

Sen. Claiborne Pell
(AP photo)

The Pentagon, which had classified the rainmaking program as "top secret," refused at the time to let the transcript be made public. But it later relented under prodding from Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), chairman of the foreign relations subcommittee on oceans and international environment, which conducted the hearings.

In a statement accompanying the transcript, the subcommittee said the rainmaking was conducted over North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The cost of the six-year program was estimated by the subcommittee at $21.6 million. It involved 2,602 cloud-seeding flights, the bulk of them in 1968.

Pentagon witnesses testified at the March 20 hearing that the objective of the rainmaking was to disrupt enemy forces by softening road surfaces, causing landslides along roadways, washing out river crossings and keeping soil saturated.

There was uncertainty among the witnesses, however, about the program's effectiveness.

"The results of the project cannot be precisely quantified," Army Lt. Col. Ed Soyster of the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the subcommittee.

He said some experts "estimated that rainfall was increased in limited areas up to 30%.

To maintain secrecy, the Pentagon handled the rainmaking program in a manner similar to the Cambodian bombing, in which reports to lower echelons were falsified and accurate accounts were submitted only to top authorities.

"Because the program was considered sensitive, reporting procedures were instituted to limit knowledge of the program," Soyster testified. He said the cloud-seeding flights were "reported through normal channels" as either weather reconnaissance flights or straight reconnaissance missions.

The cloud-seeding, involving the dropping of silver and lead iodide chemicals, was conducted by 7th Air Force planes stationed in Thailand.

Expressing puzzlement over the secrecy surrounding the operation, Pell told one witness:

"I am reminded of the old maxim—'An elephant labored and a mouse came forth.' What was the reason for this great secrecy?"

Air Force Maj. Gen. Ray Furlong, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, agreed.

"Your observation—the elephant laboring and bringing forth a mouse—I think reflects in large measure our current perception of the classification," he said.

Included in the hearing transcript was a letter from former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird apologizing for having told the Foreign Relations Committee on April 18, 1972, that the United States had never engaged in weather modification over North Vietnam.

In the letter, dated last Jan. 28, Laird said he had "just been informed that such activities were conducted over North Vietnam in 1967 and again in 1968."