

DECLASSIFIED IN FULL
Authority: EO 13526
Chief, Records & Declass Div, WHS
Date: FEB 19 2014

Interview of

MELVIN R. LAIRD

MEMBER, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 1952-68;
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, 1969-73

WASHINGTON, D.C.

OCOTBER 29, 1986

INTERVIEWERS: MAURICE MATLOFF AND ALFRED GOLDBERG

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION: UNCLASSIFIED

ACCESS CATEGORY: 2 (PERMISSION OF INTERVIEWEE REQUIRED TO CITE OR QUOTE)



HISTORICAL OFFICE

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Office of the Secretary of Defense 5USL8552
Chief, RDD, ESD, WHS +
Date: 17 FEB 2014 Authority: EO 13526
Declassify: _____ Deny in Full: _____
Declassify in Part: X
Reason: 6.2(a)
MDR: 13-M-1056

Matloff: This is Part III of the oral history interview held with Mr. Melvin R. Laird on October 29, 1986, at 10:30 a.m. in Washington, D.C. Representing the OSD Historical Office are Dr. Alfred Goldberg and Dr. Maurice Matloff.

Matloff: To what extent did you as the Secretary of Defense become involved with NATO policies, buildup, and strategy? Do you recollect that aspect of your service?

Laird: The first meeting of the NATO Council that I went to, I believe, was probably not until April or May, and also at that same time I went to the Nuclear Planning Group meeting. That is when I invited them to come to the United States. The next year we had our meeting two days here in town and then we went out for three or four days to Airlie, which is in Warrenton, Virginia. I think that was the first time the Nuclear Planning Group had met in the United States. I had several visits with Helmut Schmidt, who was then a kind of shadow defense person in the Social Democratic Party. I also had some meetings with Gerhard Schroeder, who was the Defense Minister of the Federal Republic, and we put together a task force to work on various papers and other matters for NATO. I also developed a relationship with Dennis Healey ahead of time. I had known him as a member of British Parliament over a long period of time. So my contacts as Secretary of Defense were ahead of that NATO meeting. I put together a NATO task force in ISA and I also had Ivan Selin put together a little group down in Systems Analysis that worked and reported to Bob Pursely in preparation for NATO initiatives, particularly on burden-sharing, and also to develop and start moving towards the total force concept with the NATO group.

Matloff: What did you see as the major problems in NATO during the period when you were Secretary of Defense?

Laird: The major problem in NATO was that the European community was very much opposed to what the United States was doing in Vietnam. The first thing that I had to do was to explain to them that we had a program to disengage and to Vietnamize the Vietnam-Southeast Asia problem, instead of continuing the problem of Americanizing it. The first matter they raised with me was Vietnam. I tried to get them onto the question of burden-sharing and the proper role that they must play. They were very critical of what the past administration had done in taking four billion dollars worth of stores out of Europe and not replacing them. In particular, ammunition, aircraft, and other material had been diverted supposedly from the NATO forces, had not been replaced and had not been paid for. They would always come back and hit you on that, but I tried to get the argument over to their lack of response and their lack of contribution to the NATO alliance because several of the countries had gone down almost one percent of their gross national product in their support for the alliance. The most important thing I had to deal with was the Vietnam thing, whether it was with Helmut Schmidt, Gerhard Schroeder, Dennis Healey, Margaret Thatcher, or any of the players that were in the other arena over there in those major countries, and even in France, where Defense Minister Dupree was a long-time French politician. He had gone through the whole French involvement in Vietnam, and he wanted to spend the first couple of hours talking about Vietnam. So when you ask what major problem I had in NATO when I became Secretary of Defense, the

answer is Vietnam. They were raising Cain. They had the budget figures on the withdrawal of ammunition and spare parts. Our supreme commander at the time was giving them that information because he had to share that information, even though he was a U.S. General. He gave them all that information, and all those drawdowns were real because the Defense Department was not coming to Congress to get replacements. They were actually stealing from NATO to finance Vietnam.

Goldberg: That is what the French had done with Algeria and Vietnam before.

Laird: That is right. They were getting us. I did the same thing to Dupree. You asked the most important problem, and I have to tell you that was the most important problem. I tried not to let them dwell on that.

Matloff: You raised the question of burden sharing. In your view were the Europeans pulling their weight in NATO?

Laird: I did not feel that they were pulling it adequately. They used as an excuse the fact that we had drawn down on all that stuff, but I had to be sometimes not easygoing with them. You know, you can't be easygoing with them when you are talking to them. It was as though they did not believe that the Russians were going forward with the buildup. I told them at the first NATO meeting that the Russians were going forward for a first strike capability. I said that I did not know what their intentions were, but I was talking about capabilities. You know that I got a lot of bad publicity on that—for example, bad editorials in The Washington Post. Tonight I am having dinner with Meg Greenfield from The Washington Post and Cap [Weinberger] is going to be there—just about four of us having dinner together. At that particular time she was the

number two person with The Washington Post in the editorial section. I have needled her about those editorials because the Russians did move forward with the big weapons and so forth and so on. I gave them briefings and I showed them for the first time our satellite photography. I went through a full briefing with all of the Defense Ministers of NATO, showing them exactly what was going on. This was the first time that they had seen the clean photos without screens. We had been showing them some photos but we had screened them with the device which took away some of the resolution.

Matloff: I take it you went along with the allied sharing in the nuclear defense planning in NATO?

Laird: You bet.

Goldberg: Do you think that we ever felt that the other NATO countries were pulling their weight?

Laird: I have never felt that they had been pulling their weight. I am sure that some people may differ on that, but I do not think they are pulling their weight today. I mean that they are crying right now because of what the President has proposed in Iceland. They are very critical. I talked to Franz Josef Strauss the other day in Bavaria. Mrs. Thatcher is very critical. They think they are pulling away the whole shield as far as Europe is concerned. They have got to understand that if we do go down to a low level of nuclear weapons, missiles, and so forth, their responsibilities are going to be even greater and they have got to face up to that. They somehow do not want to.

Goldberg: But our experience has been in doing these historical studies that at almost every stage since the beginning our problem has been getting the European countries to meet the goals that were established.

Laird: That isn't only true of Europe; it's also true of the whole world in which we live. Everybody looks to us to do everything. Look at Asia. The Japanese tried to hide behind the MacArthur constitution. The MacArthur constitution does not preclude them from contributing to their defense. The MacArthur constitution does not say that they cannot take over the ASW and the air defenses of Japan. We are doing most of it. They finally got above one percent of gross national product in Japan. Finally, they are at one-point-one as in this budget, right there now, and that is only the last budget. But they have had a free ride, and they always say, "The United States will take care of it—the United States will take care of it." That is why I went to Japan.

Matloff: How did you view the future of NATO from the standpoint of the American military role in it, when you were the Secretary of Defense? Did you see the American military role as permanent or eventually withdrawing?

Laird: I thought that there would be an eventual lessening of the troop presence of the United States in Europe—just as there was in Korea. You know, when I made that withdrawal in Korea, a lot of people thought that was terrible. I did not think we could make a manpower withdrawal from NATO then. I argued with Senator Mansfield and others at that time that we could not make that move as long as we were pulling out spare parts, ammunition, and all these other things, as we had since '66, '67, '68, and with some programmed even after I got there. I convinced a majority of the Congress that, although we could make a manpower move in Korea because of our Asian involvement and the Vietnam affair, we should not

make any troop withdrawal in NATO at that time since it would send the wrong signal.

Matloff: You were envisaging an eventual troop reduction but not the reduction of the nuclear deterrent?

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Laird: No, but we had too many nuclear weapons in Europe. There is no question about that. When I became Secretary of Defense, we had [REDACTED] nuclear weapons in Europe and a lot of them were old and bad. You probably know that. We still have too many there. They have not moved some of them. They shouldn't be there.

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Goldberg: That is always a big problem.

Matloff: By implication I take it that the last element to be uncoupled, if there were to be an uncoupling, would probably be the nuclear deterrent rather than the American ground forces.

Laird: Sure, and now with the President's proposal on the table that is even more important. You know that this President is going to get an agreement regardless of what anybody might think. He is determined to do it, and he has gone much further than the Defense Department or anybody else around this town wanted to go. He went further than a paper that Cy Vance, Schlesinger, Brown, Brent Scowcroft, Bud McFarlane, and I wrote. I do not know if you ever saw that paper.

Goldberg: We have it.

Laird: Cap raised hell with me on that paper and the Defense Department raised hell because we said no deployment for seven years. The President has already agreed to ten years of no deployment. I'm talking about SDI.

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We got Cy Vance to sign that paper. That was an unusual thing. When you get people together in a kind of consensus, everybody has to give a little bit. Cy gave quite a bit.

Matloff: Let me focus, since we already raised the question of the relationship between NATO and Indochina, on the war in Asia. Do you recall your attitude toward the struggle in Vietnam when you took over as Secretary of Defense?

Laird: My attitude always was, and has been, as you know, that that was a bad place for us to fight. I put out the white paper in 1966. I really think that Eisenhower was right. Remember when Nixon came out when he was Vice President and said we should send forces, Ike called him back and gave him a public spanking.

Matloff: How much of your time as Secretary of Defense was actually taken up with the war in Indochina?

Laird: I hate to tell you—too much time. The first thing every morning I would meet with my so-called public affairs group, since that was very important. That meeting would be with Dan Henken, Jerry Friedheim, Dick Capen, Carl Wallace, Bill Baroody, and Fred Buzhardt. Of course, my two military assistants would always be there. The Chairman of the Vietnam Task Force would always be there, too, because we always had somebody from the trained staff that had the watch during the night. That was always good for maybe thirty minutes. Then the next meeting was with the Vietnam Task Force every morning and that would run from thirty to forty minutes, or as long as it was necessary.

Matloff: You met with them every day?

Laird: Every day. Then every night before I would leave, the targeting list would come up to me. Everybody thinks I changed targets and things like that. The idea was that I would approve the order going out, and I did approve it every night. Admiral Moorer would usually bring that up. If he was not there, the director of the Joint Staff—there were several—did. We had some good directors on the Joint Staff and you can talk to them sometime, if you want to. Johnny Vogt was always very good, and also George Seignious. I interviewed every watch officer before he was appointed to the joint staff. I thought it was important that I knew the man that was in charge down there each time. I only turned down one. I turned one down, not for a very good reason, but I wanted them to know that I was reviewing them. I just turned him down. But once in a while you have got to do that in order to show that you are paying attention. It was probably unfair to the person. I thought about it afterwards, and maybe it was unfair. I said, "Send up another name. I would like to look at someone else." But you do that for a purpose. With the military you have to. I am very pro military but you have got to show once in a while who is in charge. That is like the Admiral's list and things like that. I have told you about sending some of those back and it is always good to do that.

Matloff: Where and how were you obtaining advice on the war in Indochina? Was it primarily through the Vietnam Task Force or were you seeking advice from other sources?

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Laird: I was seeking advice. I always met separately with the CIA and that was George Carver. He would do a briefing for me once a week. Neither Murphy nor Pursley was there because I wanted to get a different input. I met with DIA and I would also meet with the service intelligence directors. I do not know if they still do that or not, but I would have that breakfast with them. Then, individually of course, I met with Noel Gayler, who was my NSA man, on Monday afternoon and on Friday afternoon—twice a week.

Goldberg: Was George Keegan one of the service directors? Did you get a lot out of him?

Laird: Yes, I got more than he wanted.

Matloff: How often did you go to Vietnam as Secretary of Defense?

Laird: I did not go too often. I decided that I would go twice a year, and that I would use my service secretaries. On occasions I sent the service secretaries, one in each quarter. I would also send Barry Shillito, a very good man, who was in charge of installations and logistics. I had great confidence in Barry and I sent him almost every month. Barry's wife to this day bitches about that, but I had to have someone who had continuity. I could not be running over there all the time and so we decided, at the start, that I would go twice a year. I had somebody there on quite a regular basis. I did not let service secretaries overlap in any way. I approved all those trips.

Matloff: When did you reach the conclusion that the time had come for the United States to withdraw?

Laird: To start withdrawing? I reached that conclusion very early. I thought that we were committing too many people there in 1966 when I put out the white paper to the public and Congress. Then, I think you will recall, I put out the fact that there was a plan to withdraw troops from Vietnam in October, and Clark Clifford came out on the orders from President Johnson in 1968. He was forced to go on Meet the Press and say that there was not a single plan to withdraw a single troop in Vietnam. That was a big mistake. I guarantee that if he had not done that, if Clifford or Humphrey would have just broken a little bit with Johnson at that time, Humphrey would have been President.

Goldberg: If Johnson had just not been so hard nosed about it.

Laird: Yes, but he ordered Clark Clifford. I know Clark Clifford did not believe what he was told to do, but he did it as a good soldier—one of the toughest things, I think, he had to do in the ten months he was Secretary of Defense.

Matloff: What or who influenced you to make the Vietnamization of the war your first priority? Did domestic political considerations—for example, Nixon's reelection in 1972—influence you in any way?

Laird: No. It was just the public position our country was in. We had to get with it. The whole country was fed up with this thing.

Goldberg: The President felt the same way?

Laird: He did not feel quite that way. No, he did not feel as strongly. He thought that he could ride it out and, of course, Henry was always pushing him one way and I was pushing him the other way.

Goldberg: Kissinger was pushing to ride it out, to continue until we got something we could accept?

Laird: Yes.

Matloff: Did this lead to a conflict with Nixon and Kissinger on the question of the pace of Vietnamization? Which were you arguing for--the faster pace, I take it?

Laird: Yes, the faster pace, and I always overstated what we needed to take out each time. One time it was only 5,000, but for 5-15,000 my program was always just a little bit more because I knew they would cut back. The State Department was particularly concerned. Alex Johnson would get to Bill Rogers and he would get Bill so worked up that we were going to go down the drain the next day. At the meetings there Bill would always express Alex Johnson's position.

Matloff: Apart from Vietnamization, were you consulted on possible initiatives and operational measures to end the war in Vietnam? I'm thinking of such things as bombings of North Vietnam?

Laird: Yes. We sent those papers.

Matloff: Do you recall what position you took on the secret bombings of North Vietnam soon after you came into office?

Laird: There was no secret bombing in North Vietnam. There was secret bombing in Cambodia, but there was nothing secret about the bombing of the North.

Matloff: How about the incursion in Cambodia of May 1970?

Laird: I was for that, but I disagreed with the administration. I had authorized them to go in there before the White House even knew it.

I had authorized Abrams to go forward in Laos, the Southern Vietnamese troops to go in there and to pursue into Cambodia, into those sanctuary areas. I was for bombing the sanctuaries. My disagreement with the President and with Rogers and Kissinger was on keeping it secret because I said that you cannot keep a secret with 12,000 people involved. That is why they accused me of leaking to Bill Beecher that we were bombing in Cambodia—that came out as a front page story. I was the first person they called. I was playing golf at Burning Tree. Kissinger called me out there and said, "You have got to go in there and see the President. He is just madder than hell at you for leaking that story." I said, "I'll be glad to come in to him but that is a lot of baloney. I want you to know that I don't have to defend my position by leaking information. I told you that this was going to be public knowledge." I know how he got the information. He has told me since. But that was a great mistake to do that on a secret basis. That really set off the students and everybody else all over the United States. I could have defended that with the Congress in a public way. I went up and told my friends in the Congress about it. I told George Mahon and Jerry Ford. I told Ed Hebert. I told Senator Stennis. I told Senator Symington. I told Margaret Smith. I told them in secret, privately, because I knew that it would come out. That leak did not come from me or from any of the people that I had briefed.

Goldberg: It always has worse repercussions when it comes out that way.

Laird: You bet. It is best to put it up front at the beginning. That is the trouble with some of the books that have been written about this. They all say that I opposed that bombing.

I recommended the bombing. I recommended the whole bombing plan. The difference was not in the plan, which I wanted, but in the manner in which it was conducted.

Matloff: Did this position extend also to the bombings in North Vietnam and the mining of Harbors in 1972?

Laird: We did not keep the mining in the harbors secret, but I recommended mining the harbors. In 1969 I sent the paperwork recommending the mining of the harbors, but I never recommended keeping anything like that secret. You cannot, in a situation like that, operate in the secrecy mode when you have many people involved.

Goldberg: What was your view of the extent to which the civilians in the White House, from the President on down, became involved in the actual mechanics of the war?

Laird: It took them a long time to go along with the mining of the harbor. I mean that should have been done before we put troops in there. That should have been back in 1966.

Goldberg: I am really talking about what has been called the micromanagement of the war at that level.

Laird: It took them a long time sometimes to get the responses out of the White House. I had no problems with the White House. They never interfered with any bombing or orders to any commanders, contrary to what you mean here. Admiral Moorer will tell you this. People who worked with Bus Wheeler will tell you this.

Goldberg: This was, then, a change from the previous administration in that regard?

Laird: I think that is true, but I had a directive from Nixon. I made him sign it and sent it to everybody in the Defense Department, everybody in the State Department, and everybody in the White House. You have probably seen it—I can't give you the number of it but it was a pretty firm order that I got him to sign. I had no problems with anybody over there. Nixon never interfered. When I briefed him on the Son Tay Raid, and that I wanted to go forward with it, I did that on a carrier. I remember that was on the night of Nasser's death. We came from the Pope out on this carrier and I gave a dinner party. Then I took him away and gave him a briefing on what I wanted to do on Son Tay. I told him how we were getting this information and what it would mean to our POWs. I also told him that I was not sure there would be anybody there. I was very careful about that. I said, "I have had these people training and we are going ahead with it, unless you have some objection." He said, "Mel, go to it." I never had any problem with him. He did not call up, after it failed. I did not think it was a failure as an operational affair. We got everybody in there and we got everybody out. They came all the way from Thailand and that is a hell of a long way. That operation involved a lot more mileage than the rescue mission in Iran, and those men did a fine job. General Leroy Manor was in charge. He had everything that he needed. He talked to me regularly but there was nobody that could interfere after the go was given. He had that decision himself, whether to go or no go. You understand that, don't you?

Goldberg: Yes, I do.

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Laird: I had a good relationship with Kissinger, I want that understood. Kissinger and I are still very good friends. He supported me on most occasions. I can remember five or six places where we had differences. The one that probably caused us the biggest fallout was the secrecy of the Cambodia affair. We had a knock-down drag-out fight. It wasn't a fight about going into Cambodia, but the manner in which it was done.

Matloff: The Son Tay raid, November 1970, will be covered in the OSD history which is being written on POW/MIA policy within the Department of Defense. I know that you are familiar with the Ben Schemmer book on that and most public knowledge of the raid comes from that book. Do you feel that there is anything of special interest that the historians should be aware of?

Laird: It would be good for you to know that we had a black-out of all communications with those people. Absolutely no one could communicate with them until they got back. I want you to know that there was one person sitting there with me all during that time. I invited him over to my office because I was interested in getting the first report when they got over the border. That person was Dick Helms. A lot of people say, "The CIA told you that you shouldn't do that in the first place." That's just not right. The CIA and our intelligence people told us that there was a 50/50 chance that they would be there. I told that to Bull [Simons]. I had him and [BG] Manor in my office, and told them to tell their people also, to let them know in advance. I told them to make sure that all the people were volunteers and that they understood that this meant more than rescuing these people. It would show our concern for the POWs. Dick was

there, and then Tom would come up. We had an open line down to the command center. There wasn't any big difference in the intelligence committee. They hadn't come up and told me to call that raid off.

Matloff: This will be very useful to the historians. To get back to Vietnamization, what was the reaction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the pace that you wanted in Vietnam?

Laird: They were always a bit slower. I don't blame them. They always want to have a little extra insurance. Once in a while you can't afford all the insurance policies that you might need.

Matloff: How did you convince them that there was a need to withdraw American forces?

Laird: I convinced them strictly on the politics of the situation. Abrams understood that better than anyone else. In our country you have to have the public behind you, and we had failed to do that. We had not leveled with them during the previous four years and there is no way you can get that credibility back. "Gentlemen," I would tell them, "You've got to be practical here. There are many more important things coming down the line as far as the defense of America is concerned and as far as our alliances are concerned. If we lose all of our support, whether in the Navy, the Air Force, the Army, or wherever you are in the defense establishment, it will be something we won't be able to recover from."

Matloff: Were you thinking in terms of the need to rebuild the armed forces?

Laird: NATO; the whole situation as far as Asia was concerned; the whole area of the four multilateral defense treaties that we had and the four

bilateral treaties that we had. We had to live up to those commitments and we couldn't let everything slip away. Abrams was the best on this. Were you able to interview him before he died?

Matloff: No, but some of our people in the Army historical office did. He was a great supporter of history in the Army.

Laird: He was a great man. I've never had anybody support me as well as he did.

Matloff: Were you also thinking in terms of the need to rebuild the armed forces system in the post-war era?

Laird: Yes. I went through the whole gamut of that. That's interesting about Abrams. Nixon didn't want me to appoint Abrams as Chief of Staff of the Army. He called me to the White House and said, "I'll sign this thing, but I really don't think he's the man you should appoint." Al Haig was always against Abrams, as you know. He didn't want him appointed. He got to the president through Kissinger. So I had to go over there and make a special call. In that appointment I had to call my chips, as I had to do it with Bob Froehlke's becoming Secretary of the Army.

Goldberg: What was the objection to Abrams?

Laird: They thought that Abrams was not the type of public image that was needed in the Army.

Goldberg: They were 100% wrong on that one, weren't they?

Laird: Absolutely.

Matloff: About the Vietnam settlement, which was signed on 27 January 1973, just two days before you left office—were you satisfied with that settlement and had you played any role in connection with it?

Laird: Yes. I got the agreement in there that you could only put in replacements, that the Russians, Chinese, and the North Vietnamese would agree with that. That agreement really broke down on that point, and that was the point that I insisted in putting in. They went forward with a massive buildup in the next year, which was absolutely in violation of the Paris agreement. I blame the Chinese just as much as I do the Russians. I pointed this out to Deng, when I was in China. I had a good visit with him. He was always raising Cain about Vietnam because now he was on the other side. I said, "You in China let all that stuff come on Chinese railway. This problem with the replacements, which was in violation of the Paris accord, is as much on your hands as it is on the Russians'." He didn't know what to make of that, but I just kept hammering at him.

Goldberg: It's a familiar story. The same thing happened in Korea, the Korean armistice specifications on what could and could not be brought in. They didn't pay any attention.

Matloff: When you left office at the end of the first Nixon administration, were you satisfied that your central objective in Vietnamization, that is, the withdrawal of American combat troops, had been successfully accomplished?

Laird: I felt it could succeed, provided the Paris accord was lived up to and provided that the South Vietnamese would demonstrate the will and desire to remain free. I always had some problems with their developing a will. I saw a stronger will on the part of the north than on the part of the south. That's something you can't provide a person or a country. That has to come from within. You can give them all the arms and everything

else, but if they don't have the will and the desire to remain free and have a sense of loyalty to country, they are not going to make it.

Goldberg: They didn't even have an effective government.

Laird: They had a bad government, and they had a lot of people in that government that had their hands out too often.

Matloff: Let me give you a quote appearing in your final report as Secretary of Defense in early 1973.

Laird: Didn't I put "will and desire" in there?

Matloff: Not in this connection. This is what you said: "Vietnamization . . . today is virtually completed. As a consequence of the success of the military aspects of Vietnamization, the South Vietnamese people today, in my view, are fully capable of providing for their own in-country security against the North Vietnamese." That sounds optimistic at that time. Why, in your view, did the South Vietnamese then later fail to secure their independence?

Laird: I think that you will find in that report someplace the "will and the desire" thing. I'm sure that I stressed that, because you can't guarantee the military security of South Vietnam without the will and desire factor.

Goldberg: Did you get hearts and minds in there, too?

Laird: No, I didn't get that in there.

Matloff: In your view, did the United States fail in Vietnam? If so, was it a failure of national policy, military policy, or failure to take into account American public opinion?

Laird: I think that it was a failure on our part to put the needed pressure that we should have been putting on the Soviet Union and the Chinese to live within the accords. I believe that we got carried away with detente—the whole idea that, by gosh, we could get along with the Russians. But the Russians just continued pouring stuff in there, violation after violation. We did not even want to call to their attention that they were violating the accords, and that the North Vietnamese were being equipped in this manner. It was like when I went over and tried to get Henry to point out the violations the Russians were making in the SALT I agreement on the ABM and how they were going forward with inscription and so on. He absolutely insisted and got Ford to make a public statement that there were no violations. I finally wrote an article for the Readers' Digest and pointed out the violations that were going forward. In most of these things, once you go public with the Russians, and really go after them, they will pull back. Henry and President Nixon got carried away there for a period, and Nixon became almost impossible to get any decisions from. Ford got carried away with the idea that Henry got him in this detente period, and they didn't want to point out these things.

Matloff: Did you write that article when you were Secretary of Defense?

Laird: No, it was after. I will give you a copy of it.

Matloff: How about the factor of American public opinion—was that taken sufficiently into account by our policy makers, by our theorists who were writing about limited war before the Vietnam War?

Laird: I don't think that our public was ever fully informed and prepared about what was going on. A declaration of war, if you are going into

something like that, has got to be made. You have to go forward and you have to have public support. That was a bad mistake we made.

Goldberg: What do you think of our theorists who, from the Korean War on, were talking about being prepared for limited war, conventional wars, etc. Our lessons from Korea and Vietnam have been that it is very hard for us to get involved in a limited war and an undeclared one.

Laird: We just can't get involved in that. I think that we should have learned that--particularly where we have to commit American ground forces. It is just something that we've got to stay away from in our kind of society.

Goldberg: Could we have gotten declarations of war for Korea and Vietnam, do you think?

Laird: We could have. When Truman went to the United Nations, I think he should have gone to the Congress at the same time.

Goldberg: And Vietnam, also?

Laird: Yes.

Goldberg: And you think we would have then taken the gloves off.

Laird: Right.

Matloff: Some of the theorists who have written on limited war, like Robert Osgood, have recanted on that question of public opinion, that the theorists had not taken into account--that if you had a protracted limited war, American public opinion might not hold up. They had completely neglected that in their writing.

Laird: It won't hold up in Central America if we get heavily involved down there, I'll tell you. That will be the biggest mess you have ever seen.

Matloff: Would you comment on the role of the press and its reporting on Vietnam?

Laird: I can't really fault the press. I think that probably we have to live with that. I always viewed them as not something that you could shove aside. You have to deal with them openly in our society. It would be nice to be in the position like the Russians are in Afghanistan, or the Iranians and Iraqi in their big war. Nobody is putting that on the nightly news. The Russians don't have anything in their news about Afghanistan. I'm thankful we don't operate that way. Everybody says that it would have been a different story if we hadn't had all those reporters over there, but our society is not set up that way.

Laird: They were good to me. Did you see that article in the Armed Forces Journal that when the press rated the Secretaries of Defense, they have continued to rate me as number one. That should speak fairly well as far as my relations with them. I have raised hell and argued with them.

Matloff: How about the publication of the Pentagon Papers in June of 1971?

Laird: I did not leak the Pentagon Papers.

Matloff: I did not say that you did. I mean, what was your reaction?

Laird: I thought it was good to have them out, but I had to take the position that it was bad the way they were put out. It was to my advantage to have that material out, but I had to oppose the manner in which they were released.

Matloff: To this day Secretary Rusk is unhappy with their publication. He says he was never consulted by anybody who compiled those papers about

the role of the State Department. It was a surprise to him that this project was going on in the Department of Defense.

Goldberg: They were not what McNamara intended either, according to him.

Laird: No. And, of course, Kissinger contributed to those papers. They should have been released after being gone over very carefully. There was probably less than one percent of the material in the papers that would have had to have been deleted.

Goldberg: It was deleted in the official publication, and released subsequently.

Matloff: In retrospect, how do you view the domino theory?

Laird: I believe in it. I think that it is a valid principle. The manner in which you conduct it, the strategy and tactics you use, is a different question. The influence of a neighboring country cannot be underestimated, that's all that theory is.

Matloff: In connection with China, and the initiatives that were taken by Nixon and Kissinger, were you informed in any way in advance that the administration was going to make these moves? Were you drawn in at all on the discussions?

Laird: I was involved in the big discussion on Taiwan and China in the National Security Council. I was not involved with the decision to send Henry to China. That decision was made by the President himself. I found out about it through my log on aircraft, because I made the military air transport report to me on the use of every aircraft. I did tell Henry, and he damn near went up the wall, because he couldn't believe that I knew that he was going to China. But I never told anyone else.

Goldberg: Who brought it to your attention?

Laird: The military assistants. They thought that I should know, because I was going to be in Japan, and go to a meeting in Korea. I told Nakasone, who was the Defense Minister, and I briefed him on that fact the day before it was announced that Henry had been to China. I was in Japan.

Matloff: Was this a trip you made on your own? Was the President aware that you were going?

Laird: Yes. He was aware that this was the first time a Defense Secretary had ever gone to Japan and that we were going to set up this Japanese-American defense committee to have interchange on a regular basis with the military. I had gone to Korea first because we had our joint Korean-American defense meetings which are held twice a year. The two years before I had sent Packard. They were a little upset that I had never gone to one in Korea so I went to that one. Then I went to Japan and spent one week. I reviewed two of the Japanese divisions in the northern islands. It was the longest review I've ever seen. I stood there for 6 1/2 hours.

Matloff: This was during the time Kissinger was in China. Was there any heartburn on the part of the administration that you were talking with the Japanese at the time that Kissinger was laying the groundwork for closer relations with China?

Laird: They were concerned about that and they asked me to cancel my visit to Taiwan, which I did because of Kissinger's trip.

Matloff: Was there any opposition to your going forward with the Japanese?

Laird: No, they thought that was a good idea. Kissinger said, "You cannot go to Taiwan, it will be very embarrassing for you and for me."

Matloff: What were your views on arms control and disarmament during the period of your tenure, and did they differ in any way from those of Kissinger and Nixon?

Laird: I had great respect for Paul Nitze. I brought him over here and put him down the hall in DDR&E and I made him Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Arms Control. I wanted him as Assistant Secretary of Defense for ISA, but Goldwater was giving me a bad time about that. He was saying that he was the man who fouled him up and accused him of wanting to pull the nuclear lever all over Germany, and so forth. He has since changed his position. Paul would report to me on arms control and had tremendous influence in the whole program that developed as far as SALT I was concerned and had a very great influence on what was done.

Matloff: We have interviewed him at great length.

Laird: I think Paul contributed a great deal. I had a backchannel with Paul when he'd go out of the country. He was very important. General Allison represented the so-called Chiefs, and quite frankly was a fine military man and general, but was very weak. A very bright man, but never really got involved in arms control. I think that he didn't believe that anything in arms control could work. He and Paul were at loggerheads most of the time.

Goldberg: He told me once he was planning to write a book about it, but I have never seen it.

Laird: Allison got across the wrong way with Scoop Jackson. That's why I had to call the Chairman down and tell him he had to change--because of Scoop and because of Paul.

Goldberg: Did Kissinger have anything to do with replacing Allison? That came at the same time that Smith went out, too, didn't it?

Laird: I'm not sure. Kissinger, I think, heard from Scoop, who was getting his information from Dorothy Fosdick and Perle. Perle and Fosdick were always right down the throat of Allison. Paul handled himself well for the Department of Defense and represented it admirably.

Matloff: Did you go along with the SALT I agreement?

Laird: Yes.

Matloff: How about the antiballistic missile treaty in 1972?

Laird: Yes, I testified more on that than anybody else in the administration. It was pretty hard for me to get that through. If I had lost the ABM, we never would have had the treaty. I guess you know how I got that through. I had to get Mrs. Smith to change her vote. I did all my lobbying myself. On important issues I had to keep ahead of it, but when there was something like that I used the Vice President's office, right off the floor of the Senate. We were losing by one vote. I finally got Mrs. Smith into the room, just the two of us, and I told her that if she didn't change her vote, there would never be any arms control agreement here. I had to make a few arrangements with her, but she went in and changed her vote and it passed. If we had not had the ABM, at least approved that one site, there would have been no incentive for the Soviets to think that we were going forward with the treaty.

Matloff: Did you oppose a nationwide antiballistic missile program?

Laird: I was for it. I changed the McNamara program. McNamara had an ABM program that was really crazy, to protect us from the Chinese. I was

against that in the Congress, so when I got over there I told Dave [Packard], "We are going forward on the ABM, but we are going to reconfigure the whole thing and I'm putting you in charge of this." I didn't support it in Congress, in the Appropriations Committee, and it is not a defensible position to take.

The San Francisco speech that McNamara made is not defensible and that is why I was opposing it. Now if we can reconfigure this toward the Soviet threat and then move forward into the arms control arena, that makes some sense. So that's what we did, we had that reconfiguration.

Goldberg: What about this shift from defensive bombers to defensive missiles? What was behind that?

Laird: Same thing. It was all part of that general strategy. We have a good paper on that—you've got that paper, haven't you? It's a paper that we came out with and prepared for our briefing when we went to the White House and National Security Council and got them to junk the Chinese defense.

Goldberg: That's the one Wohlstetter worked on?

Laird: Al worked on.

Matloff: We have interviewed him also.

Laird: Al is a little crazy right now. I am telling you—we did that paper on no deployment for seven years. Al wants to deploy almost the same thing with just a little laser variation next year. Have you talked to him?

Goldberg: Yes. I've seen him in recent years and Maury interviewed him some months ago. I've heard him in action on this subject. He has gone overboard.

Laird: Yes, he has.

Goldberg: But he has a lot of company.

Laird: Sure. I just talked to the former director of the arms control agency this morning when I was there. He's Jerry Smith. I was trying to get him to be a little optimistic in his outlook. He is the most pessimistic person right now that I have ever seen and he has been in the last three or four years. We are going to have some real breakthroughs in this area.

Goldberg: You mean on the SDI?

Laird: Yes, we are going to have some real agreements with the Russians.

Goldberg: Oh, that kind of breakthrough—not the technical aspect.

Laird: No, I am not worried about the technology, we are going to make some progress there. But I am saying that we are going to make some breakthroughs and there is going to be some sharing with the Soviets.

Matloff: Let me ask you about a typical workday in your life as Secretary of Defense. How many hours, for example, did you spend a week on the job? how much on the Hill? how much at the White House?

Laird: I don't know. It is pretty hard to tell you that. That job would be so easy to have right now without a war going on. You know, it would be duck soup to run that department without a war going on, particularly if you had the background with the budget and everything else that I had had over the years in Congress.

Goldberg: You'd have a lot more time for travel, wouldn't you?

Laird: The war made it an entirely different situation. A lot of my time was spent with the Congress because of the war. A lot of my time was

spent with the Department of Defense because of the war. There probably would not be more than one night a week that I would not get out of bed because someone felt that he needed to call me. I did not want people to stop calling me. I always expressed my appreciation, thanked the caller, and so forth. Most of the calls were not necessary, but you never want to kill a messenger.

Goldberg: They want to feel important too.

Laird: Sure. That's fine.

Matloff: I know from what you said last time that you had contracted for just one term.

Laird: I announced the first day that I was going to have a Yellow Cab there to pick me up.

Matloff: When you retired from the post, did you feel that that was long enough?

Laird: Plenty long.

Matloff: How long should a Secretary of Defense serve?

Laird: Not more than four years.

Matloff: Did you get a chance to brief your successor, Elliot Richardson?

Laird: Yes. I spent quite a lot of time with him, and then I got him to take Dan Murphy on. We delayed his going to the Sixth Fleet. I said, "Elliot, you keep him here for a little while, but I do not want this order changed on his going to the Sixth Fleet. The same thing, I don't want anybody playing around with my arrangement with Chappie James, because I have him on that route to NORAD and I do not want anybody playing around with those things." Dan was great for Elliot. Elliot was only there a short

time, as it turned out. Then I briefed Schlesinger because they asked me to come over. Elliot asked me to come over and Schlesinger asked me to come over—so I did—because Elliot had not really gotten involved.

Matloff: Let's turn to your perspectives on OSD organization and management from your experience and reflection. Do you feel a need for further changes in organization, structure, or working relations—for example, the relationship of the Secretary to the Chairman of the JCS?

Laird: Yes, I worked on the reorganization with Andy Goodpaster, you know—this legislation that just went through. I was the vice chairman of the Georgetown Study and then I worked with the Packard Commission. Dave Packard used this office here. He had an office around Lafayette Square, but he said that he could never get any work done there so he always used this office. I worked with Dave and I am convinced that those recommendations are sound and good and I agree with them all.

Matloff: Do they carry forth the Fitzhugh panel recommendations?

Laird: Yes and they are very good. I have met with the new man that has just taken over and have had three meetings with him since he's taken over. He came from Bechtel and I think that he is going to be all right. He is going to bring in his deputy, the former head of Mitre, and that thing is moving along very well. He is not too well informed on defense acquisition and procurement, but he has got good common sense and I think that he is a strong person and will do a good job. I think that change was long overdue. I would have made that change, if I did not have that darn war going on. I was for that change but you can only do so many things. You have to set your goal. First I had Vietnamization; then I had the

selective service, the all volunteer service; then I had the total force concept. Those three priority things I had to get across. So I made some changes. But you cannot do everything.

Matloff: So you would have done more with the Fitzhugh proposals, absent the war?

Laird: I agreed with the Fitzhugh proposals and we did quite a few of them that we could do easily. I think that the change with the Chairman was a long overdue change, and I support all of those recommendations. I got Dave to come back and do this last study. He turned down the President and they called me and asked me if I would work on Dave, and I did. I got Dave to agree to come back and do it. Dave did a good job.

Goldberg: How do you feel about the Navy's continued resistance to these changes right from the beginning during the last forty years?

Laird: I think that this new acquisition man has got to make a lot of changes and Cap has got to support him. Right now the Navy is making a hell of a mistake on forcing contractors to pay tooling in advance. The only people that are going to be hurt by that are the Army and the Air Force because they are going get it all unloaded over to them. You have got to have one acquisition policy, one procurement policy, and you cannot let the Navy get out from under it.

Goldberg: But, aside from that, the Navy is opposing all of these changes.

Laird: But the President and the Secretary have got to support these changes. They say they are supporting them. There is going to be a test in that within the next two months.

Goldberg: So you see no real weight in the Navy's arguments again?

Laird: No.

Matloff: We would like to ask some questions concerning volunteer forces.

Goldberg: Do you still consider the volunteer forces a good idea? Do you think it is still a good idea for us?

Laird: You put me in a kind of a bad position there. My first priority, as far as manpower is concerned, would be universal service. The costs of universal service are very high, but I think that you would get a lot out of it. The best way to do it is if everyone gives a certain amount of time. There was no way of my pushing that at that particular time because of the cost problem.

Goldberg: Marshall could not get it either.

Laird: We had to make a change. The first change I made was to take away the college deferment and to go for lottery. A lot of people said that I could not do that but we did that in the first year. It was important to make that change because military service was not being shared properly within our society. That was the first thing I had to do—I couldn't get through universal service. The second thing was to move towards the all-volunteer service because that is cheaper than universal service, because you really only need one out of seven young men and women in the military service in order to fill all your manpower requirements. So the volunteer service is cheaper than the universal service because of the budget constraints and so forth. That was the way we had to go and so I am for that. I would still sometime like to go for universal service to fulfill the lower brackets in manpower in the military services. When we get into the cost of that, we probably are not going

to get it for ten years. It will come sooner or later. It is going to come sooner if we get an agreement on nuclear weapons. It is going to come much sooner if we go to zero.



But even if you got down to a small number, universal service will come and replace the volunteer service. It is very costly. JS 3.3(b)(6)

Goldberg: Not selective service, but universal? What about the cost of what we actually had when you came in, as compared with the all-volunteer force?

Laird: They were not being paid enough anyway.

Goldberg: So the cost was going up?

Laird: The cost had to go up anyway. I was in a position where I was taking the military services down by a million men, so it was easier to do it at that particular time.

Goldberg: So would you say that going to the all-volunteer force caused any budget constraints elsewhere?

Laird: No. This idea that you would not have to pay those young people on the same basis that you pay other people in our society is crazy. You cannot have a negative tax against the one out of seven persons who has to serve in the military services. That is negative taxation, if you are not paying them on the same basis as an apprentice plumber gets for working outside. You have got to pay people on a comparable basis. I think you will do that, except in universal service where everybody makes

a contribution. That is not negative taxation, as long as they are only giving a year or eighteen months. I could give you a lecture on that, but you do not want the full load right now, do you?

Matloff: No, but we may come back again.

Laird: But watch what happens here. When you start going down on nuclear weapons and the deterrent, you are going to have your deterrent in the conventional area then. The conventional area means more manpower.

Matloff: Let me ask you one last question. What do you regard as your major achievements in your tenure as Secretary of Defense and then, conversely, what disappointed you the most?

Laird: I have to say: first, was the honorable withdrawal through the Vietnamization program; second, was the all-volunteer force eliminating the selective service; and third, probably the total force concept as far as planning was concerned—not only in the United States but also with our allies around the world. My greatest disappointment probably was: first, after I got out, I do not think that we put enough emphasis on living by the accords of Paris. Secondly, I did not have the time to put into effect some organizational changes that were long overdue in the Department of Defense. But as we were bringing down our military personnel by a million, we were also bringing down our civilian personnel down by a million. A lot of people don't realize what we were doing over there as we were making these reductions. We could not do all that reorganization at that time. Fortunately, I've had the opportunity to work with the Georgetown Institute of Strategic Studies and with Dave Packard on a very close personal basis on some of these reforms and they are being made.

But I will be forever in the debt of Gil Fitzhugh and that particular panel for the work they did, not only in their intelligence report, but also in their organizational report on the Department of Defense. They were right on.

Matloff: Thank you, Mr. Laird, for your cooperation and for sharing your recollections and insights with us.

Laird: I will be glad to meet with you again some time, but I really do not think that I can add a lot to your study.

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MELVIN R. LAIRD
Senior Counsellor: *National and International Affairs*

December 4, 1987

Dear Dr. Goldberg:

Mr. Laird asked me to return the enclosed transcripts of his oral history interview to you. I am sorry it has taken so long, but his travel schedule has been quite heavy.

He has selected ~~Category 2 which requires permission to cite or quote from this interview.~~

If you should have any questions, please call.

Sincerely,

Laurie Hawley
Administrative Assistant

Dr. Alfred Goldberg
OSD Historian
Office of the Assistant
Secretary of Defense
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IAW EO 13526, Section 3.5
Date: FEB 19 2014