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Interview of

MELVIN R. LAIRD

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

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Matloff: This is an oral history interview held with Mr. Melvin R. Laird in Washington, D.C., on August 18, 1986, at 10:30 a.m. The interview is being recorded on tape, and a copy of the transcript will be sent to Mr. Laird for his review. Representing the OSD Historical Office are Dr. Roger Trask and Dr. Maurice Matloff.

Mr. Laird, we shall focus in this interview first on your role as a member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee from 1958 to 1968, and then on your service as Secretary of Defense, 1969 to 1973. During your long service in the House from '52 to '68, you had extensive experience on the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. By way of background, did you welcome the appointment to this subcommittee, and if so, why? What background and interests did you bring to the subcommittee?

Laird: I came to the Congress as a fairly young member; I was 29 years old. My background had been four years in the U.S. Navy, and I was interested in the Defense Department and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. I was appointed to both of those committees in 1953 and became the ranking member of the Health, Education, Welfare, and Labor Committee in 1954, when John Tabor stepped aside and asked me to assume the responsibilities as ranking member. When I first went on the Defense Appropriations Committee, the committee was divided into three panels, the Air Force panel, the Army panel, and the Navy panel. Each panel reported to the full committee, but the hearings were conducted separately for each of the three services. The committee

then would get together and take the recommendations on each of the three service budgets. In 1956 that procedure was changed, and the full committee met considering each of the services and the Department of Defense all at the same time. I think that it was very important that that change was made, because with each panel you got into the same situation you sometimes do over at the Pentagon with the Joint Chiefs of Staff bargaining down there in the tank. I think that it was a good change and that it worked out very well.

I'm not sure that I asked to go on the committee. Clarence Cannon and John Tabor came and asked me to go on it. I think that they wanted me to go on the committee because they thought that I would oppose the aircraft carrier. I voted for the aircraft carrier and I think they were very disappointed when I cast that particular vote. But if you ask me why I went at an early time on the Defense Appropriations Committee, I think that they thought that I was rather conservative and would vote the other way on the carrier. That particular year that was the big issue.

Matloff: The two functions, as I recall, that the two subcommittees had, were both oversight and appropriations. How did the committee handle those two functions?

Laird: We had a separate staff on appropriations, which was a career staff that did not change as parties changed. As you know, in the 83rd Congress the Republicans were in control and in the 84th Congress the Democrats came back in. The appropriations

committee staff did not change. We had an oversight staff, which was an entirely different staff and was run by Robert Lee, when I first went on the committee. He later became a member of the Federal Communications Commission and left our oversight staff. On that staff we had about 50 members. They were drawn from the FBI, the General Accounting Office, sometimes from the services, and sometimes from business and industry. There were 50 professionals on that oversight staff and a support staff with them. Their responsibilities were entirely different from the appropriations committee staff, but they both reported to the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

Matloff: Do you recall what problems the subcommittee faced when you joined it? Did those problems change over the course of the decade that you served on it?

Laird: I think the biggest problem was the funding levels and the disagreements between the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch. One of the first big disagreements was over the Polaris submarine. Our committee insisted on setting up a project manager with complete contract authority and responsibility and we also were for funding this program at a much higher level than the Executive Branch. I remember once that President Eisenhower called me up for breakfast in his second-floor chambers and tried to convince me not to offer the amendments to increase the Polaris funding. He felt that the Polaris funding should not be increased until the submarine and the missiles

had been fully and completely tested. The Secretary of the Navy had failed to convince me not to offer the amendments, so they put the President on me, but I went ahead and offered the amendments and we carried. I think that John F. Kennedy was very pleased at the time of the Cuban missile crisis that the Polaris submarine was in place and available as a very important deterrent as far as the Soviets were concerned. If we had followed the Secretary's and President Eisenhower's recommendation, the Polaris program would not have been available until 1964-65. By putting in the funding as early as we did, we were able to speed up that program and have it in place two years earlier. I had been working very closely with Admiral Red Raborn, who was very interested in this program and on the side was helping me, just as Admiral Rickover used to help on the side. We never broke any confidences, but their staffs really did the background work and slipped me the information that was necessary to set up the single project manager and also to provide the overfunding of the Polaris program. I can give you a lot of examples like that, but I think that's a pretty good one because there was a real conflict there between the Executive and Legislative Branches, and I think the leadership of the Legislative Branch in this case was very important. It proved to be important as you got into the early 1960s. We also can go back and look over the Atlas and the Titan programs. As you recall, the project manager for the Atlas program at that time was General Benny Schriever, who had been appointed by the Chief of Staff

of the Air Force. A lot of people were rather skeptical of whether we should go forward with the funding of not only the Titan and the Atlas, but our committee, I think, was out ahead on that matter. When Sputnik came, I think that many people were very pleased and happy that we had been funding those programs and that we were in a position where we could catch up rather rapidly. That was done over and above recommendations that were made by the Executive Branch.

Matloff: It occurred to me in listening that this is probably where you got your interest in the research, procurement and development which you exercised later on when you became Secretary of Defense.

Laird: We had some very interesting meetings on that. I worked very closely with Congressman Glen Lipscomb of California. He probably was the best informed and brightest member of Congress with a real, dedicated interest in Defense. We toured every one of the research laboratories of the Defense Department. We even toured the outside contractors, like Bell Laboratory. We went over their highly classified programs on the OSHA and SW systems. We went out and were responsible for getting the chairman of Lockheed, Mr. Gross, to go forward with a follow-on to the P-2 aircraft, because the P-2 had gotten to be the only vehicle we had for ASW work, but if you flew a mission with one of the P-2s, the equipment was so jammed in there that it was impossible to do any good search work as far as the SW was concerned. We suggested to them that they use the Electra, which had a larger search area, and had a great deal of room. The P-3 was developed out of the old

Electra aircraft. It was a cheap way of going forward with the long search vehicle for the Navy and the SW field, and we were able to use a plane that was really pretty much off the shelf.

Matloff: In your service on the subcommittee, did you get interested in problems of organization in Defense?

Laird: I got into that quite a bit. One of my good friends, and a person I still see a lot of, was Bryce Harlow, who at that time was over in the White House.* He had been a member of the staff of Carlton and on the House Armed Services Committee. At that time Eisenhower had come up with some very important recommendations for the organization of the Department of Defense. In 1958, although all of the recommendations of President Eisenhower were not followed, it was a very important first step, which later led to the recommendations of the Gil Fitzhugh Commission in 1970, and then finally were in the Georgetown Institute of Strategic Studies study of the past year and culminated in the report of the Packard Commission this year. All of the recommendations were not new, but they were taken from those of '58, from the Fitzhugh Report, and from the Georgetown Center of Strategic Studies Report of a year ago. Then the Packard Commission came out and endorsed almost every one of those recommendations, and because of its presidential stature and the popularity of President Reagan, I believe the Packard recommendations will finally spring forth with changes which really started back in 1958.

Trask: When you became Secretary of Defense, did your attitudes change about congressional involvement? And something that the

*Bryce Harlow deceased 1987.

Packard Commission has addressed—there has been some criticism of what they call congressional micro-management of Defense. Did your perspective on the role of congress and individual congressmen change after you became Secretary of Defense?

Laird: I hope not. I spent a lot of time with the Congress. I never lost a vote in the Congress on anything, and I would not permit the White House to lobby for me. The worst thing that's happening to the Department of Defense right now is that they don't do the job over in Defense. They should keep all that off the back of the President of the United States; keep it out of the White House; run their own show over there. That was one of the things I insisted upon when I became Secretary of Defense. I wanted no White House interference. That's what's happened now. Every time they have a problem they go to the President to make the telephone calls. The President should stay out of this business. That was a problem that I feel very strongly about: the Secretary of Defense should be in charge of all congressional liaison and work with the Congress and there should be no interference from anybody in the White House at any time. In addition to that, the Secretary of Defense should have full and total control over all military and civilian personnel and not have to check out a single appointment with anybody on the White House staff. I insisted on that.

Matloff: You were a unique Secretary of Defense.

Laird: I wouldn't take the job unless I was assured of that, because I had convinced President-Elect Nixon to take Scoop Jackson, and I

traveled with him on his campaign plane. Bryce Harlow and I would sometimes alternate, but one of us was always aboard with the President during the entire campaign. We had convinced him to take Scoop Jackson for Secretary of Defense and Scoop had agreed to do it. Then he got over to Hawaii with a bunch of his Democratic colleagues and they convinced him that he would have no chance of being President of the United States if he took that job in a Republican administration. Scoop had been bitten by the Presidential bug and the day before Nixon was to announce his cabinet he called and he pulled out. That was when Nixon turned to me and said, "You got me into this, you're going to get me out of it." I replied, "I'll get you out of it under certain conditions." That was why I was able to get some authority that I think every Secretary of Defense should have.

Matloff: Yours is a unique background for the job of Secretary of Defense, since you had that long experience in Congress. By the time you left the subcommittee in 1968, were you satisfied in general with the organization of the Department of Defense? You mentioned the 1958 reorganization.

Laird: No, I was not satisfied with the organization of the Department of Defense. That was the reason that I went forward and appointed the Fitzhugh Commission. The problem was that I had so many things on my plate, and the war was going on in Vietnam at that particular time. I decided the first week that I was Secretary of Defense that I would set priorities. The priorities I had to set were, first, to wind down

American involvement in Vietnam, because public support was at the breaking point. In addition to that, the previous administrations had poured over $10 billion in stores, equipment, ammunition, and other things without replenishing the stocks, not only in NATO, but here in the United States, and had been following a policy of fight now, pay later. It was necessary for me to wind down the war and make up for the deficiencies that existed, because they had not leveled with the Congress of the United States on the cost of the war in Vietnam. I had made that point as a member of the committee. It wasn't anything new. So the number one priority was to take care of the setup of the Vietnamization program, which I did; the number two priority was to modernize the draft. The draft at that time was very unfair. The college deferment program was being used so that military service was not shared adequately among young people throughout the United States. One of the first things I did was put in the lottery system. People said that I couldn't do that. I remember when Kingman Brewster came down with a lot of the college presidents. I told them what I was going to do and they said, "It will never go; they've tried to do that in Congress for years." I went up to the Congress and told them I was going to do it, and they accepted it. I put that in and told them I was going to work to end the draft and that when I walked out when the taxicab called for me on the 20th of January, 1973—I'd already ordered a Yellow Cab to be there to pick me up—there would be no draft. Those priorities were set and established.

I would have liked to have carried out the reorganization of the Joint Chiefs at that particular time. But there are only so many things that you can do when you are in the midst of a war and when you take over a situation where you have 550,000 people on the ground in Vietnam; and 2.2 million that were supporting that ground operation through air and naval operations. Your plate was pretty darn full. I do agree with the Fitzhugh report. Mr. Packard has been here using this office while he has been doing this last commission study. I agree totally and completely with those reports.

Matloff: Were you satisfied with Secretary McNamara's use of the powers granted him by that 1958 Reorganization Act—the powers to achieve increased unification, for example? Did you have any impressions while you were a member of the subcommittee about how the powers were being used?

Laird: We had disagreements from time to time. We particularly did in some of the accounting changes that Secretary McNamara and Comptroller Hitch wanted to put through. We stopped those. Basically the committee was supportive of most of those changes, except when it got into the question of accounting. We did put some stops on McNamara in that area.

Matloff: President Eisenhower was often labeled a budget firster by members of Congress. Does that accord with your impression?

Laird: I remember that Ike felt that he knew the Defense budget better than any president in the history of this country. He had been in charge of certain legislative lobbying activities for the Department

of Defense back in the early days, and he felt that he knew the Congress. The only other military officer that really felt that he knew the Congress as well as Eisenhower was probably Jack McCain, who later became CINCPAC and was a Navy lobbyist for a considerable period of time. He used to come over to my office and walk to committee with me every morning because he wanted to talk about everything that was going on. He and Eisenhower really thought they knew the Congress. When Ike set up a budget, he didn't like anybody to monkey around with it, the Defense budget in particular. In 1960 when I was co-chairman of the Platform Committee at the Republican convention in Chicago, Ike was up in Newport playing golf. He was there for 3 or 4 days, and then he was coming out to the convention in Chicago. On one particular evening Nixon and Rockefeller got together in New York—perhaps you recall the Park Avenue Accords. One of those 13 amendments they wanted in the platform was to increase the appropriations for the Defense budget by $5 billion. Ike got up the next morning, read The New York Times and saw that Nixon and Rockefeller had agreed that the Defense Department was underfunded by $5 billion. He called me that morning and said, "Mel, Nixon's coming to town tonight, to the convention. You go and tell Nixon that he's got to decide whether he wants Rockefeller's support or mine. There's no justification to adding $5 billion to the Defense budget." That was at the time when Kennedy was campaigning and talking about the missile gap, and that there wasn't enough in defense, and was being critical of President

Eisenhower. But Ike felt that he was right, that his budget was right, and that it was up to me to go and tell Nixon that. So I did tell Nixon that and he made the choice. He backed away from the Park Avenue Accord to add $5 billion. That's how strongly Eisenhower felt about his Defense budget.

Matloff: Would you say that he was the dominant influence in setting the Defense budget in his administration?

Laird: Absolutely.

Matloff: Of the basic components of the defense budget in the 1950s, appropriations, obligations, and expenditures—to which did you pay the most attention as the indicator of the direction and shape of United States defense policy?

Laird: Expenditures.

Matloff: Did the initiation of the authorization requirement prior to appropriations, which came in about 1957-58, in any way significantly change the way the subcommittee operated?

Laird: Yes, I think it did. It slowed up the whole process.

Matloff: Did you go along with that procedure?

Laird: I think that it would have been better if they had done at least a two-year authorization and keep at least one year ahead. Renew the last year and add another year in authorizations. I felt that that would be the proper way to carry it out because it slowed down the whole appropriation process. As a matter of fact, in many years since that time we've had to operate the Defense Department on

continuing resolutions for many months. It had to do with the fact that that whole appropriation process was slowed down because the authorization process was not able to keep far enough ahead. You have the situation developing right now, the authorization bill on the floor of the House at the same time the appropriation process on Defense is going through the subcommittee. The authorization bill knocked out the Trident submarine, and that very day the appropriations committee reported out the add-on of the Trident submarine. There should be a lead time of at least one year. The Packard Commission deals with that subject and takes it into account.

Matloff: Did you and your colleagues on the subcommittee favor the management reforms in budget formulation that were introduced by the McNamara regime in Defense? While you were on the subcommittee, he was working in the 1960s on changing the whole approach to the budget in Defense. How were you and your colleagues reacting to those changes?

Laird: Our appropriations committee went along pretty well with that. I think he had more problems with the authorization committee in that area. Our appropriations committee felt that some of those changes were long overdue. There were certain accounting changes that they wanted to bring about that we did hold out. But we felt that coordinating the budget in the manner in which the Secretary wanted to do it was a good move.

Matloff: What were the dominant factors that influenced your thinking and the positions you took in the subcommittee on defense appropriations?

For example, was it Eisenhower's New Look policy, or your conception of the threat facing the United States? What influenced your views?

Laird: If I had to say just one thing, I think that it was perhaps the threat to the national security of the United States. If you have to put it in just one category, I would say that that was probably the predominant factor that influenced me.

Matloff: How did you see that threat?

Laird: I disagreed with the position that was taken by Allen Dulles and the CIA at that particular time. He came up to brief us on many occasions and he always took the position that the Soviets were going to have to be assigning more and more of their gross national product to consumer goods; that they had problems at home; and that they wouldn't be able to maintain 9 percent of their gross national product in the area of 9 to 10% in defense. I was of the opinion then and made several statements and speeches at the time that the Soviet Union would be able to devote almost anything it wanted to national security; that it didn't have the public policy problems that we do in the United States. I think that the CIA has always been wrong in that area. I think that they are wrong today. Casey is coming up with the same kind of estimates today, saying that the Soviet Union now is up near 14% of their gross national product and there's a lot of pressure. There is no pressure in the Soviet Union. It can devote almost as much as it wants to the national security and defense problems. It doesn't have the problems of public support that the defense establishment has here in the United States.

Matloff: During the 1950s there were several scares promoted by military intelligence: for example, the bomber gap, the missile gap, both of which proved to be erroneous. How much faith did you put in military intelligence during this period? In the 1950s your subcommittee received military intelligence estimates from the JCS Chairman, and beginning with the tenure of Secretary of Defense McNamara the balance of forces reports became the domain of the Secretary. Did the change of jurisdiction in any way lead to a significant difference, from your perspective, in the character of military intelligence that you were getting?

Laird: Yes. It first became rather suspect because it seemed that the military intelligence was more geared to budget considerations than it was to the conditions as they did exist or might exist in the future. The control by the Secretary of Defense of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency is perhaps the most important tool the Secretary has. As you know, two of the first positions I changed when I became Secretary of Defense were the Director of the National Security Agency and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. I had a search put on by Bob Froehlke, who was my Assistant Secretary for Administration and my close personal friend. He was from my congressional district. We grew up together from grade school through high school and he ran every one of my campaigns, numbering eleven. He was president of an insurance company in my district, and became Assistant Secretary of Administration. We

called in the two people that I wanted after he made recommendations to me. One was General Bennett. I said, "No one goes any place from the Defense Intelligence Agency. Since it's been created, no one's ever made four stars. You're going to make four stars. When I walk out of here four years from now, you'll be wearing a fourth star, if you do a good job for the country and for me. This is no place for some military officer that is on his way out and this is [not] just a stepping out position before he retires." I did the same thing in the National Security Agency, because I had watched these people and I didn't think they had strong individuals. None of them ever got any promotions after they left there. I called in Noel Gayler, and I said, "You've been recommended by Mr. Froehlke for this job. You will be the new Director of the National Security Agency. You have three stars now. You will have your fourth star before I leave here." You've got to make those people realize that they are responsible to the Secretary of Defense, and you have to have loyalty from them. I met with them personally any time they wanted to meet, but always twice a week. I would always set aside time, for those are important positions. As you know, in November when I got ready to leave, I sent General Bennett to Korea and gave him his fourth star and made Noel Gayler CINCPAC. So I carried through on my end of the bargain because they did a superior job. I think it was important for those agencies and down the line to see that there was some place to go from there. I give you that in the way of a little history, because I

really think that McNamara and Clark Clifford, who was only there for 10 months, once they were established, didn't pay much attention to them.

Matloff: What were your impressions of the comparison between what you were getting from the military intelligence reports and the reports from CIA, during the period you were on the subcommittee?

Laird: The CIA has always been of the opinion, and continues to be to this day, that the Soviets cannot give to national security and defense over a continuing period of time the amount of resources that they have proven that they can. We footnoted a lot of things in the intelligence reports in the Nixon administration. I insisted on those footnotes. Some people criticized me for saying one day up on the Hill that the Soviets were going for a first-strike capability, that there was no question about it. We footnoted those reports right down the line. I saw that they were footnoted by Bennett, and some of those footnotes are rather interesting reading right now.

Matloff: How did the subcommittee handle the matter of the dissemination of classified military intelligence? Was that a problem?

Laird: We had arguments often, particularly with Secretary McNamara, because he would sanitize the transcript so much that we could hardly recognize it sometimes when it came back. We never had a leak on that committee all the time that I was there. I assure you that there were no leaks from that committee. I was told by Cannon and John Tabor, when I first went on the committee, how they handled the Manhattan Project and how there was never any break of security on

the part of the committee. That impressed a young member of congress. I always stayed very impressed by that briefing they gave me on that.

Matloff: Do you know the story about the officer in the Operations Division of the General Staff during the war period who suddenly on his own got the bright idea that the country should develop the atomic bomb? He sent up a memo to that effect and was promptly put under investigation in fear of a leak. Do you recall the subcommittee's reaction to the Gaither Report of 1957 and the assumptions about Soviet missile development on which that committee based its report?

Laird: We had quite a discussion on that. Have you got our committee transcript on that? We had a hearing on that, you know.

Matloff: We'll try to get hold of it.

Trask: Was it printed?

Laird: Yes.

Trask: It's very likely that we have it, then.

Laird: Don't you have that on a computer, so you can pull it up?

Trask: No, we don't; I would like to. Our office is small and we are lucky to have word processors, I'm sorry to say.

Matloff: How closely did your subcommittee follow the development of military strategy as it was being evolved in the Department of Defense? For example, what were the attitudes of the members toward the nuclear weapons, conventional versus nuclear defense, and such things as first strike use. Did you and the committee members have positions on these problems?

Laird: Yes, we had positions in our committee reports that were sometimes controversial, but they were agreed upon. You will find that we took a position in the committee reports which was very strong on the use of nuclear weapons. We did not want, at any time, for the Soviet Union to have any preconceived notion of what action the President of the United States might take. We were strong in keeping that open and very ambiguous. We made that clear in our committee reports. I think that we were the only committee that was out ahead making those statements, that we wanted that to be rather ambiguous. We were perhaps the only committee that had been fully briefed on what the procedures were.

Matloff: During the 1950s substantial resources were being expended in the area of continental defense. Within the Department of Defense this was a rather hotly contested subject. Was this true among the members of the subcommittee as well? Was the subcommittee wrestling with this?

Laird: We did wrestle with that, particularly the position taken by Secretary Brucker. That was more or less an Army position; the Army was selling that all over and moving very strongly on it. Ike never went for it quite as much as the Army did. He didn't reflect it in his budgets; he always cut them back on that.

Matloff: This was the period when Taylor was talking about "the Babylonian captivity of the Army." Lemnitzer had the same feeling. How did you and your colleagues react to the changeover from the

massive retaliation doctrine of the Dulles period to the flexible response strategy of the Kennedy-McNamara period?

Laird: We felt that because of the contingencies of the times we had to make a change there. It was all right to have the massive retaliation policy as the only policy you were following when you had unilateral control of nuclear weapons, but when you got to the position where that was no longer the case in the world in which we lived you had to make a change in your strategy.

Matloff: You went along with the changeover?

Laird: Yes.

Matloff: You wrote in 1962 the volume, The House Divided: America's Strategy Gap. What led you to write the book, and what did you see as the major strategic problem at the time?

Laird: The major strategic problem at the time was that we were not getting the attention of the American people and of the public generally to the problems of international communism and the fact that, I felt, there was a tremendous buildup going forward in that area. I was concerned about it. Do you have the White Paper that I wrote in 1964 on the Vietnam War? I was Chairman of the House Republican Conference and we put out a pamphlet on how they had escalated the war and that we were in a situation where this was now a war. It had gone far beyond the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and so forth.

Trask: We should have that.

Matloff: We might even add that as an appendix to the interview.

Laird: That paper is interesting.

Matloff: What was the attitude of the subcommittee back in 1958 to 1968 toward America's involvement in the war itself?

Laird: Our subcommittee was very much concerned about the manner in which they were planning in that war, because they weren't leveling with us. I remember looking McNamara right in the face and saying, "Mr. Secretary, you really need a good rest. You've been over there too darn long and you're not giving us the facts on what you're spending." He got madder than the dickens and cussed a little bit, and George Mahon said, "Mr. Secretary, we don't use that kind of language in this room." Since then I think McNamara will tell you that he did stay too long.

Matloff: He's been very forthcoming in our interviews with him on the Vietnam War. Did you believe in the domino theory back then? Was it a valid theory?

Laird: I felt that it probably was valid, but I also agreed with Eisenhower that if they can't handle it themselves over there, Americans shouldn't be used on the ground. I remember when Eisenhower shot down Nixon, when Nixon was Vice President and wanted to put forces in there. Ike came out with a very strong statement.

Matloff: Were there any other differences in attitudes in the subcommittee toward the various administrations' handling of the Vietnam conflict? In 1966, for example, you publicly declared that the Johnson administration be charged with deception about the Vietnam War.

Laird: I also called on them to come to the Congress with a declaration of war.

Matloff: And charged the administration with delaying decisions in escalating the ground war until after the congressional elections.

Laird: This is an interesting thing. Clark Clifford will tell you about this. I was traveling with Nixon during 1968, and I got the word that Humphrey was going to make a speech in Philadelphia calling for the withdrawal of forces and that he was really toying with the idea. I got this via the grapevine indirectly from Paul Warnke. So on the plane I told Nixon that from Bismarck to Boise I would go back and ride the press plane and give the reporters a briefing on the secret plan to withdraw troops from Vietnam. I went back to the press plane and gave them a briefing, and at Boise they all got off the plane and filed their stories on the secret plan to be announced to withdraw 25,000 ground troops from Vietnam (of course, there were all kinds of plans over there to withdraw, and add, and subtract, there were so many plans in the Defense Department) and that this was going to be used by Kennedy and Humphrey within the next ten days. Lyndon Johnson just went crazy. He called Clark Clifford and said, "I want a denial that there's a single plan in the Pentagon to withdraw one man from Vietnam. I've got you scheduled to go on Meet the Press Sunday." So Clark Clifford went on Meet the Press that Sunday and denied that there was a plan any place in the Pentagon, or even contemplated, to withdraw a single person from Vietnam. This just drove Humphrey right up the wall. If Humphrey had handled that just a

little bit differently, he would have been the president of the United States. But Johnson went so strong on that that Clark Clifford agreed to do that. This was October, and I believe that lost the election for Humphrey—all because of a press briefing between Bismarck and Boise.

Matloff: What was the attitude of the subcommittee toward NATO? Did it view NATO as a permanent military commitment?

Laird: Yes.

Matloff: Did it take any position on reduction of US troops?

Laird: No reduction.

Matloff: There were proposals coming up from time to time in Congress.

Laird: We were not for reduction. We felt at that particular time that it was just as reasonable to maintain those divisions there as it was to maintain them in the United States.

Matloff: How about burden sharing within the alliance, was there dissatisfaction with that?

Laird: There was dissatisfaction with the burden sharing, and also as far as Japan was concerned. That was why when I became Secretary of Defense it was a lower priority item, but it was a priority item down there, after the total force concept. Another priority was to start military discussions with the Japanese. I thought that it was a great mistake that no Secretary of Defense had ever visited Japan. I felt that it was important for us to get direct talks going with the Japanese military and the defense agency of Japan. That was when I started those meetings with the Japanese. At that particular time

the head of the defense agency was Mr. Nakasone, and I went over and visited Japan. I know that some people in the State Department and others thought that it was a mistake, and that there would be demonstrations against me. It was the time when Henry Kissinger was having his secret mission in China and they felt that it was a bad thing for me to be in Japan during the same period. But there were no demonstrations. We had very good meetings, and now we have a regular exchange with the Japanese. Here is one of the meetings in 1970 with Nakasone. [Laird points to photograph on wall.] That was important, to get that thing going. At that particular time the Japanese were down to 5/10ths of one percent of the gross national product spent on defense. During that period we weren't able to raise it much. We got it up to about 8/10ths of 1%. Presently it's a little over 1 percent of the gross national product. But they have had a free ride for a long time. It was very important to get those discussions going with them because there is nothing in their constitution that says that they cannot defend their own country. I guess that I am the only Secretary of Defense who has reviewed their divisions. I went up and reviewed man for man, tank for tank. I stood for four hours one time and four hours another time, and reviewed the whole divisions, up in Hokkaido. I don't want to say that that was a priority item up with Vietnam or with the draft, or with the total force. You know the priorities that I had.

Matloff: Did any of the area problems or international crises in that decade—Berlin, Cuba, Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli War of '67—have an impact on the subcommittee?

Laird: The Cuban affair, I think, had a greater impact than anything. The subcommittee felt that we came very close to a major confrontation there, much more so than in the Berlin situation. They brought us all to be briefed over at the White House on the action. I had been accused of giving Senator Javits the information on the Cuban missiles. He was a member of the C&M group, the Chowder and Marching Society, on the Hill. Back in September, at one of our meetings, I had presented to this group (members of Congress and a few Senators that meet every Wednesday night) the possibility that the Russians were moving offensive weapons. Keating ran out of that meeting and had a meeting with the Associated Press. Are you familiar with the background? He made a statement. They denied that anything was going on at that time. Then about two weeks later they called us all back here and the President made his statement.

Matloff: This is while the EXCOMM was meeting?

Laird: Yes.

Trask: What was your source of information when you gave the C&M group this briefing?

Laird: Defense intelligence.

Trask: Was it based on some satellite photography at that point?

Laird: It was based on the U-2.

Matloff: Was the subcommittee's advice sought by anyone in the administration, on the handling of the crisis?

Laird: No, they made the decision, and just informed us. But we were concerned about it.

Trask: When they informed you, was that the day Kennedy made that speech of the 22nd?

Laird: Yes.

Matloff: What were your impressions of the various Secretaries of Defense, Comptrollers, and other top officials in OSD, while you were still in that subcommittee, from your perspective? How would you evaluate Secretaries Wilson, McElroy, Gates, McNamara, and Clifford? How effective were they?

Laird: I think a Secretary of Defense should be there for about 4 years. Charlie Wilson was there for a little over 4 years. The others—Gates was there about 15 months; McElroy maybe 18 months—were not around long enough really to become involved. Charlie Wilson had a very difficult period when he was Secretary of Defense, because Ike wanted to be his own Secretary of Defense, and always considered that he was. It is hard to judge during that particular period. Ike would have close contact with members of our committee, like calling me down for breakfast on the Polaris submarine. Ike really liked to think that he was running the Defense Department. The strongest Secretary of Defense that I had anything to do with as a congressman was McNamara. He was strong and smart. I didn't think that he was

always right, but I thought that he had good reasons for doing the things that he did. He didn't get along with Congress. That's the important thing the Defense Department has got to learn, that the Congress is just as important as the Presidency as far as defense policy is concerned. They have a certain disdain and contempt for the Congress over there. The military leadership of this country still does, and so do some of the civilians that are brought in over there. It's a very bad situation. I've never seen things so bad for the Department of Defense as they are on the Hill today. That's because they don't really pay any attention to the Congress.

Matloff: We would hope that the future leaders in Defense will read these tapes and get the benefit of your insights as well as the tapes' being used for historical purposes.

Laird: In connection with the DoD Comptrollers, how do you evaluate McNeil, Lincoln, Hitch, and Anthony?

Laird: I liked McNeil. I would say that the number one Comptroller that I served with was Bob Moot. One of the first things that I did when I was named Secretary of Defense was call Bob Moot and ask him to stay and be my Comptroller. He had been a career person in the government. I had gotten to trust him before he became Comptroller, when he was with the Small Business Administration, and in the Defense Comptroller's Office before that. He worked closely with our committee staff and I really had great respect and admiration for him. I would put McNeil number 2, if you asked me to rate them.

Matloff: Did any of the other top officials in Defense impress you during this period?

Laird: Yes, I considered them all good friends. I just think that sometimes they didn't work as closely or as well as they should with the Congress. They always tried to give the impression that they were trying not to be as forthcoming as they might be with the Congress. There was an adversarial relationship which I think is very bad. There should be no different relationship with the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch. They are co-equal in this government of ours. I got the feeling many times that they didn't feel that way. I loved Nate Twining and Arleigh Burke; I liked these people. Take the project manager for Atlas, Benny Schriever—a hell of a guy. But, really, they don't have much respect for the Congress.

Matloff: How would you characterize the performance of the JCS? You had a number of JCS chairmen during that decade—Twining, Lemnitzer, Taylor, and Wheeler. Did any of these impress you?

Laird: I really trusted Wheeler. He always leveled with me. When I became Secretary of Defense, I asked him if he would stay for a year. I went up to the Congress and got that extended for another year. I went to see Senator Russell and said, "Bus Wheeler is one of the people over there that would level with you and I would feel good if I could have him for another year." I convinced Senator Russell, along with getting that separate thing set up for Dave Packard, that I needed Wheeler and I needed Packard. That's why we got those special arrangements made for Packard and for Wheeler.

Trask: I have a question about McElroy and Gates. Some people argue that McElroy was not very good. As I looked into it, it seemed to me that he was overly criticized. But Gates has a very fine reputation as one of the better Secretaries of Defense.

Laird: I think that the Secretary of Defense should serve for four years and not much longer.

Trask: Two years is too short a time.

Laird: The thing about it is, as I always told Elliot Richardson, "Elliot, you always change jobs before anyone can make a judgment on you. You've never been in any job more than 18 months." If you're there for just two years, you can postpone any decision during that period of time; you don't have to do a damn thing.

Trask: You're saying that in the case of McElroy and Gates you can't really evaluate them.

Laird: I liked them, and thought they were doing a good job, but I think it's unfair to judge.

Laird: [Refers to paper] This is interesting because it shows the U.S. estimates of the Viet Cong strength and what they were doing on those strength figures. It also shows the U.S. military buildup in Vietnam year by year, starting from 1960. Johnson was madder than the dickens about this report. But it isn't a bad report.

Matloff: We'll put it with the transcript. How would you describe the process by which Congress shapes and influences the direction of U.S. defense policy? What are the impressions that you have received over the years?

Laird: The number one manner in which it influences defense policy is through monitoring fiscal control. Having that control, it can do anything it wants.

Matloff: Any other aspects?

Laird: There doesn't need to be any other. The Congress can exercise complete and total control. Sometimes it's easier not to, but if they wanted to, they could. Some members of Congress now like to say that they had no way of stopping the Vietnam buildup. That's not true. There's always a way. There was always a way to stop the bombing in Cambodia. They finally did, but it took a long time. The Congress does have that authority and can influence defense policy just as much as the President of the United States.

Matloff: During the decade of 1958-68, how much did Congress influence Defense policy, and in what ways?

Laird: I think very little. The Congress did not perform its duty as far as following closely enough the funding of the Vietnam buildup.

Matloff: Earlier you spoke about some colleagues in Congress who were particularly informed on Defense matters. Do you want to add any other names?

Laird: George Mahon and Glen Lipscomb. Lipscomb was probably the best informed. Jerry Ford was well informed; he served on the subcommittee, too. I sat next to him. Les Arends of Illinois; Bill Bates of Massachusetts; Uncle Carl Vinson and Mendel Rivers on the authorization side. The best informed in the Senate were Senators Russell,

Stennis, Young of North Dakota, Margaret Chase Smith, and Stuart Symington of Missouri.

Matloff: Would you include Henry Jackson?

Laird: He was very well informed. I would include him but he didn't spend as much time on defense as Russell and Stennis. He spent a lot of time on the Joint Atomic Energy Committee. He never got to be the ranking member or chairman of defense. The strongest chairmen that I can remember were Senators Russell and Stennis. They were always good friends of mine. I had been on the appropriations committee with them and gone to a lot of defense appropriations conferences with them over the years. They were very well informed. George Mahon was an unusual man. When I was Secretary of Defense, he would invite me to the markups, the executive sessions of the committee, because I had a history of the undertaking, and there never was any objection to my being around during those particular times. I had a fine relationship with him. I went down and campaigned for him when he had his biggest problem in 1962, when he had a very conservative Republican running against him. I remember that I spoke for him at Big Springs and Lubbock. George thought that was a very important thing. I got the worst letter ever from a young professor teaching college in Texas, John Tower. He wrote me the most blistering letter because I would go down there and campaign for a Democrat.

Matloff: To wind up this segment—looking back, what do you regard as your major achievements during your service on the subcommittee, and then conversely, any major disappointments or frustrations?

Laird: The thing that I would have to place first is the recognition of the people problems of the services. The great problems that they had were with the many unnecessary transfers of people and the fact that we were wasting a lot of money on such moves. Also, I went forward with an adequate housing program. I worked hard on those and think we accomplished something in that area. Secondly, I would probably put going forward with the ASW program and recognizing the importance of undersea warfare. Everybody was thinking of space all the time, and as far as the strategic service and conventional attack services were concerned, very few people were paying much attention to what goes on in the oceans. I think that I tried to get some attention to the attack submarine program and the nuclear program. Admiral Rickover helped a lot on that; he was a good friend. Admiral Red Raborn also helped me a lot. I probably wouldn't go a week without seeing them. They were good people.

Matloff: You were obviously a very active member of that committee.

Laird: On the HEW subcommittee I can point to things: the National Institutes of Health, which John Fogarty and I built—you can see the bricks and mortar. In the Defense area you can't point to the same thing.

Matloff: We appreciate your taking the time to talk to us about your experiences on the subcommittee. We would like to come back and discuss the Secretary of Defense role. We would like to get at it from your perspective.

Laird: One advantage I had was that the work on that committee prepared me well.

Matloff: We can see some threads running through the two periods as you were speaking.

Laird: It was a good training ground for that job.

Trask: Is there anything else that you think would be a better training ground, or do you thing that is really an experience that more Secretaries of Defense should have had.

Laird: I think that it was great training, and that was why I felt that it was important for me to have Dave Packard, because he was a friend of mine for many years. We had been working together on health and educational matters. He was president of the board of trustees at Stanford. We had problems with overhead expenses and research for college campuses, and he served on my advisory group. I felt that it was important to have somebody from the outside business world with me who was well respected and I had a relationship with him that I don't think any other secretary has ever had with his deputy. He knew he was there because of me and we would meet two and three times a day with other secretaries that had different problems. Schlesinger and Clements didn't even talk to one another. I always had an open door over there. Anybody could come in any time he wanted to, and did. A service secretary or chief never had to have an appointment with me.

Matloff: We look forward to speaking with you further on that very critical period in the department.

Laird: One of the most important people who was underestimated in that period was General Abrams, out in Vietnam.

Matloff: He was a great friend of military history, too. I was the Army's chief historian in those days, and he was a great supporter.

Laird: He was a supporter of mine. Every time the Chiefs would come up with the position that we could not withdraw anybody from Vietnam, he would always say that we could.

Matloff: Thank you very much.