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Office of the Secretary of Defense
Chief, RDD, ESD, WHS

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Honorable John C. Stennis
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to respond to your letters of July 2nd and July 3rd. In your letter of the 2nd, you refer to certain newspaper accounts quoting members of the Foreign Relations Committee to the effect that I had changed my position concerning a potential First Strike threat from the Soviet Union during the period of the mid-1970s. Let me first state categorically that my position on this matter has not changed. As a matter of fact my concern about the Soviet threat to our deterrent has been stated and restated before your Committee and every Committee of the Congress before which I have addressed this issue since assuming office on January 20th. In a letter to the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee dated July 1, I addressed this question and restated once again the essentials of my position concerning this matter. I enclose a copy of my letter to the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee for your information.

In your letter of July 3rd, you asked for my definition and evaluation of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Threat facing the United States from any and all nations.

Since I briefed you on 19 March 1969, there have been several new developments in the Soviet Strategic Forces, all tending to confirm the statements I made at that time concerning the threat to the national security of the United States in the mid-1970s. In summary, these developments are: continued deployment of the SS-9, SS-11 and SS-13; continued testing of the SS-9 with multiple re-entry vehicles; continued deployment of the POLARIS-type submarine; continued efforts to improve anti-submarine warfare capabilities; continued testing of the improved ABM and, finally, an affirmation by the intelligence community of estimates on Soviet capabilities in the mid-1970s.

During 1969, the deployment of the SS-9 has continued at about the same rate as in 1967 and 1968. Five new groups of six launchers each have been identified in 1969 compared with six groups started in

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1968 and five groups started in 1967. Four of these new group starts have been identified since I briefed you in March. If this rate of deployment is continued, the USSR could have about 400 SS-9 operational launchers deployed by the mid-1970s.

Total Soviet ICBM launchers completed or under construction now total 1,318. This includes 220 of the older SS-7s and SS-8s in both hard and soft sites, 50 SS-13s, 790 SS-11s, and 258 SS-9s. All of these will be operational before mid-1971.

Three more tests of the SS-9 with multiple re-entry vehicles have taken place since March, making a total of seven since last August. These three tests were to the mid-Pacific covering a distance of 5,100 nautical miles. There is some difference of opinion in the intelligence community concerning the precise nature of these tests but all are agreed that the USSR has the capability to start deploying hard target multiple independently-targeted re-entry vehicles in 1972, with part of the intelligence community believing the USSR could start deployment a year or two before that.

At least two new Y-class POLARIS-type 16 tube ballistic missile submarines have been launched since 19 March and the first Y-class submarine may have been launched from another shipyard at Komsomolek in the Soviet Far East, for a total of at least nine that have been launched. Continued deployment at this rate will allow the USSR to match the U. S. POLARIS fleet by the mid-1970s.

Testing of the improved Soviet ABM interceptor continues, with two more ABMs being launched against a re-entering SS-4 ballistic missile on 1 July.

Finally, I have just received an updated estimate of Soviet capabilities. It reports that the USSR has the capability of acquiring, by the mid-1970s

- some 400 SS-9 ICBMs
- multiple independently-targeted re-entry vehicles
- SLBMs matching the U. S. POLARIS fleet
- ICBM retargeting capability.

This capability would constitute a very grave threat to our MINUTEMAN forces and our bomber forces in the mid-1970s.

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Although the potential Chinese ICBM threat has slipped somewhat, it is estimated that a first generation ICBM, perhaps using clustered Medium Range Ballistic Missile engines, could reach Initial Operational Capability by 1972. By 1975 operational ICBM launchers might fall somewhere between 10 and 25. During the 1970s, China could develop a significant production program in thermonuclear weapons and associated delivery systems and, consequently, would represent a considerable threat to U. S. bases and allies in Asia, and a growing threat to the continental United States.

If I may, Mr. Chairman, I would like to sum up for you my position with regard to the Soviet threat as it relates to the urgent need for approval of the SAFEGUARD ABM proposal.

As a Defense planner, as well as a Cabinet officer and a member of the National Security Council, I have a special role in the use of intelligence provided by the intelligence community. It is my responsibility to propose policies and plans which will fulfill the mission assigned to the Department of Defense, one aspect of which is to deter the Soviet Union from starting a nuclear war.

As a part of this responsibility, I must apply my own best judgment to the available intelligence to insure that the President's policies and the mission of the Department of Defense are fulfilled. Consequently I must consider not only what are the probabilities of future development and the state of current activities as expressed in the assessments of the intelligence community but also the possibilities of future developments based on available current information.

That is why in my testimony before the Congress and in my public comments I have stressed the possible capabilities of the Soviet Union for the future in terms of relative strategic power. My discussion of Soviet capabilities has been derived by projecting to future years their demonstrated capabilities for production and deployment of strategic weapons and by making allowances for the rate of technological achievement.

It is my carefully considered judgment, in which all of my principal military and civilian advisors agree, that the Soviet Union could achieve, or reach a position where they believe they have achieved, a capability to gravely weaken our deterrent by the mid-1970s -- if we do nothing now to offset it. This judgment is based upon the following conclusions:

1. The Soviet Union could acquire a capability to destroy virtually all of our MINUTEMAN missiles. To be able to do so in the present context, they would

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used: (a) at least 420 SS-9s with three independently targeted re-entry vehicles which have a capability of separating from one another by some relatively small number of miles; (b) each of these re-entry vehicles would have to have a warhead of approximately 5 megatons and a reasonably good accuracy; (c) the SS-9s would have to be retargetable; and (d) the range would have to be sufficient to reach all of the MINUTEMAN silos.

2. The Soviet Union could acquire a capability to threaten severely the survival of our alert bombers. To do so in the present context, they would need: (a) a force of about 15 Y-class (POLARIS-type) submarines on station off our shores; and (b) the ability to launch the missiles on a depressed trajectory.

3. Although we confidently expect our POLARIS/POSEIDON submarines to remain highly survivable through the early to mid-1970s, we cannot preclude the possibility that the Soviet Union in the next few years may devise some weapon technique or tactic which could critically increase the vulnerability of those submarines. Nor can we preclude the possibility that the Soviet Union might deploy a more extensive and effective ABM defense which could intercept a significant portion of the residual warheads. In any event, I believe it would be far too risky to rely upon only one of the three major elements of our strategic retaliatory forces for our deterrent.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, it is entirely possible that the Soviet Union could achieve by the mid-1970s a capability to reduce, in a surprise attack, our surviving strategic offensive forces below the minimum level required for "Assured Destruction," and thus gravely weaken our deterrent. In my judgment, the overall strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union is much too close to run that risk. Therefore, something more must be done now to ensure a favorable strategic balance in the mid-1970s and beyond.

Short of achieving a workable agreement with the Soviet Union on the limitation of strategic armaments, which will take some time, we are convinced that the approval of Phase I of SAFEGUARD would be the most prudent and economical course we could pursue at this particular juncture. This action would place us in a position to move forward promptly not only with the defense of our MINUTEMAN and bomber forces should the Soviet threat develop as I have described, but also with the defense of our population against the Chinese ICBM threat should that emerge during the next few years.

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You also asked whether the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, concurs in my formulation of the threat. I have furnished a copy of this letter to Director Helms and he assures me that he has no disagreement with the statements concerning the potential Soviet and Chinese Communist strategic capabilities, as seen from the intelligence point of view.

Sincerely,

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/s/

Mel Laird

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Encl.

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