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THE WASHINGTON POST - SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1975

NATO MISSES SCHLESINGER

BY MICHAEL GETLER

BRUSSELS--THE ABSENCE OF FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JAMES R. SCHLESINGER FROM THE JUST-CONCLUDED NATO DEFENSE MINISTERS' MEETING HERE CAST A LARGE SHADOW OVER THE ALLIED CONSULTATIONS AND OVER THE NEW PENTAGON CHIEF, DONALD H. RUMSFELD.

INTERVIEWS WITH A NUMBER OF NATO, U.S. AND WESTERN OFFICIALS REVEALED A WIDESPREAD FEELING THAT SCHLESINGER'S PRESENCE WAS SORELY MISSED AND THAT RUMSFELD'S INITIAL OFFICIAL DEBUT AS THE NEW DEFENSE SECRETARY DID LITTLE TO EASE NATO CONCERNS OVER SCHLESINGER'S FIRING BY PRESIDENT FORD A MONTH AGO.

SCHLESINGER'S ABILITY TO FRAME NATO'S PROBLEMS IN TERMS OF BROAD GLOBAL STRATEGIES, AND RUMSFELD'S REPEATED DEFERENCE IN PRIVATE TO SECRETARY OF STATE HENRY A. KISSINGER ON A WIDE RANGE OF U.S. POLICY QUESTIONS THAT A U.S. DEFENSE CHIEF NORMALLY WOULD DISCUSS HERE, WERE THE TWO POINTS MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED BY EXPERIENCED OFFICIALS.

"HE WAS THE PROFESSOR," SAID ONE TOP WESTERN OFFICIAL ABOUT SCHLESINGER. "THE DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF DEFENSE. THE POLITICIANS PASSING THROUGH AS MINISTERS OF DEFENSE NEEDED HIM TO GIVE THEM A PHILOSOPHICAL UMBRELLA UNDER WHICH THEY COULD OPERATE AT HOME."

***** WHSR COMMENT *****

HYLAND, MCFARLANE, ODMAN, SECPLR

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SCHLESINGER, WHOSE KNOWLEDGE OF NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES RAN DEEP AND WAS MIXED TOGETHER WITH A BACKGROUND IN ECONOMICS AND HISTORY, "WAS A TREMENDOUS RESOURCE FOR THE MINISTERS AND FOR GOVERNMENTS THAT DON'T HAVE THAT BACKGROUND," ADDED ANOTHER EUROPEAN OFFICIAL.

"THE SQUANDERING OF THAT RESOURCE IS INCREDIBLE TO US," HE ADDED, "BECAUSE WE CAN'T REALLY CONSULT WITH HIM, NOW THAT HE IS ON THE OUTSIDE, WITHOUT HURTING OUR RELATIONS WITH (PRESIDENT) FORD."

MANY IN NATO'S CIVILIAN AND MILITARY HIERARCHY WERE STILL SHAKING THEIR HEADS OVER THE ABRUPT DISMISSAL OF THE FORMER PENTAGON BOSS, WHO, OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, HAD BECOME THE FOREMOST WESTERN SPOKESMAN FOR A MILITARILY STRONG ATLANTIC ALLIANCE.

THE ARRIVAL HERE EARLY THIS WEEK OF RUMSFELD, HOWEVER, WAS LOOKED TO WITH AT LEAST SOME HOPE BY ALLIED MINISTERS. RUMSFELD IS VIEWED AS BEING BRIGHT, AND, AS A FORMER AMBASSADOR TO NATO, WELL VERSED IN EUROPEAN PROBLEMS. HE IS SEEN HERE AS HOLDING A HARD LINE ON DEFENSE MATTERS.

BUT RUMSFELD IS ALSO VIEWED AS EXTREMELY AMBITIOUS POLITICALLY AND AS NOT MUCH MORE THAN A "CARETAKER" AT THE PENTAGON, A THOUGHT THAT UNSETTLES MANY DEFENSE OFFICIALS.

HIS PERFORMANCE AT THE TWO-DAY MEETING HERE WAS ALSO WIDELY REGARDED AS MUCH TOO LOW-KEY FOR AN AMERICAN DEFENSE CHIEF, WHO IS TRADITIONALLY LOOKED TO FOR STRONG LEADERSHIP.

SOME OFFICIALS, DESPITE RUMSFELD'S BACKGROUND IN NATO, WERE WILLING TO WRITE OFF THIS PERFORMANCE AS SIMPLY BEING NEW IN THE JOB.

"BUT I DON'T THINK HE COULD GET AWAY WITH THAT IF HE DOES IT AGAIN," SAID ONE COLLEAGUE. "HE'S OPTING OUT OF ALMOST EVERYTHING. EITHER HE'S BEEN TOLD TO STAY OUT OF HENRY'S (KISSINGER'S) BUSINESS OR HIS JOB IS VERY NARROWLY DEFINED. ON ISSUE AFTER ISSUE HE WOULD SIMPLY DEFER TO KISSINGER AND THEY -- THE DEFENSE MINISTERS -- WEREN'T USED TO THAT. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER JUST TO SAY HE WAS A NEW BOY."

RUMSFELD HELD NO PRESS CONFERENCE, THE FIRST TIME IN RECENT MEMORY THAT A U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE HAS SHOWN UP AT THESE SEMI-ANNUAL MEETINGS AND NOT MET WITH JOURNALISTS. EUROPEAN SOURCES SAID RUMSFELD ALSO GAVE HIS OPENING SPEECH AT THE WRONG TIME.

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"THE EUROPEANS -- THOUGH CERTAINLY NOT ALL OF THEM -- DEPEND ON SCHLESINGER FOR DEFINING ISSUES INTELLECTUALLY AND WITH GREAT PRECISION. THEY LIKED THE BIG PICTURE AND YOU REALLY DO NEED A COACH HERE," AN AMERICAN DELEGATE SAID.

"SCHLESINGER'S PUPIL, GEORG LEBER (THE WEST GERMAN MINISTER OF DEFENSE) TRIED TO MAKE UP THE OBVIOUS LOSS BY GIVING THE SCHLESINGER TWIST ON THINGS. HE DOESN'T HAVE THE SAME GRASP BUT HE IS A MAN OF STRONG CONVICTIONS AND IT WAS GOOD TO SEE HIM TRY TO MOVE IN," HE ADDED.

ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL SPOKESMEN, THE NATO MEETING WAS FILLED WITH "LIVELY DISCUSSIONS" DURING THE TWO DAYS OF CLOSED-DOOR MEETINGS, BUT OTHER NATO SOURCES SAID PRIVATELY THAT THE SESSIONS WERE GENERALLY SHORT AND DULL.

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