The harsh realities

WHEN Secretary of Defense Schlesinger appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee to launch the FY 1976 military posture hearings, he laid the harsh realities of military power and global leadership on the line.

In his scholarly but blunt fashion, he made these points:

• The United States has reduced its military strength as far as prudence permits, particularly in non-nuclear, conventional capabilities. Any additional reductions will jeopardize the nation's security until Russia is prepared to make reciprocal reductions.

• The world is still a turbulent, dangerous place, in which the “sources of potential differences and conflict among the powers remain numerous” despite detente.

• The Soviet Union has large, diversified and ever-expanding military capabilities at its disposal, tempting it to “fish in the troubled international waters” if it perceives American purpose or military power to be waning.

• America is a superpower and leader of the non-Communist world. Like it or not, it can’t escape the responsibilities of that role. World War II drove us out of “the Paradise of isolation and non-involvement” and “we can’t go home again.”

• A world leader like the United States risks disaster if it takes a passive role in world affairs, thus relinquishing control of its destiny to others. “In the face of uncertainty and a not altogether friendly world, it is more prudent to shape the future by our own actions rather than let others do it for us.”

• Detente is much to be desired, but you can’t have detente without a strong defense which deters aggressive action. Defense, deterrence and detente are inextricably linked. Without a strong defense posture, deterrence and detente both are illusions.

We strongly endorse the secretary’s remarks. He is to be commended for his candor, courage and refusal to equivocate. He calls for decisions to be made deliberately and in full recognition of the hard facts, “rather than in a casual and impulsive fashion over a period of time.”

The focal point of the battle that is shaping up in Congress is the FY 1976 defense budget, which calls for fiscal year appropriations of $104.7 billion and outlays of $92.8 billion. It is described by some as a “turn-around” budget, which attempts to halt the deterioration of U.S. military strength and commence a slow rebuilding. It requests a total of $2.45 billion for the National Guard, adequate at current cost levels but less than needed if the 12 percent inflation rate continues.

I hope that Guardmen at every level will support the secretary’s efforts to hold the line against further erosion of our military power. We can make an important contribution to the security of our country if we take it on ourselves to make Americans everywhere more aware of what is at stake in the current debate over budget and military strength.

One development, however, is disquieting. It is a renewed Defense effort to reduce Army Guard and Air Guard strength to 379,648 and 68,128 respectively, and to reduce the Air Guard’s mandated force structure from 91 to 88 flying units. An identical level was sought last year and rejected by Congress. It was renewed in the President’s anti-inflation proposals, which have made little headway in Congress. DoD has submitted an identical proposal in the 94th Congress, Speaking for the White House, an Office of Management and Budget official said it would provide needed “flexibility” to DoD. Flexibility isn’t required unless DoD actually intends to reduce manning levels. To us, it appears to be a devious way to accomplish what DoD was unable to achieve last year.