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Melvin Laird's Limitations

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Melvin Laird owns such a various array of shots that his appointment to the White House staff imparts a serious quality to what otherwise would have to be dismissed as a mere maneuver. If there is a single politician who can reverse the President's steady retreat from the force of Watergate, it is the former Defense Secretary.

Still Mr. Laird is a man with distinct limitations. He is a known political trickster. So if the President is as tarred with Watergate guilt as the signs indicate, even Laird cannot rebuild faith and confidence in the administration.

The first of Laird's many assets is his present position as the unquestioned top man in the presidential entourage. No one in the Nixon White House has ever had so much across-the-board clout as Laird. He is into politics, economics, national security and press relations.

Henry Kissinger, while still the top foreign policy man, has been damaged by his part in an ugly wiretapping scandal. The balloon of his call for a new Atlantic partnership has been pricked, and the sound of escaping air rises with each successive summit meeting. That he has to keep announcing peace in Vietnam as many times as Joe Alsop used to proclaim victory does not exactly help either.

Gen. Alexander Haig, who holds the largely political post of White House chief of staff, is a military man with

only thin connections in the power centers of the private sector. Even his secure base in the military has been shaken. For Gen. Haig has had to resign his commission, at least in part because of pressure from the services against an overly political general.

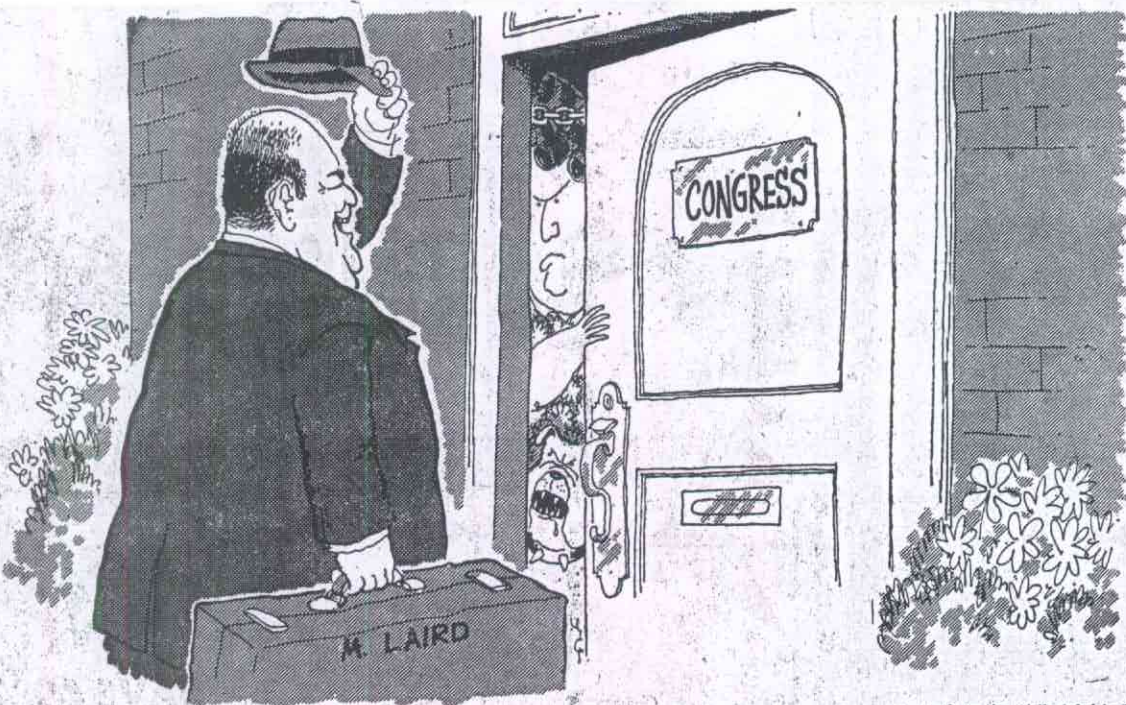
Ron Ziegler now manages press relations on sufferance. He may be promoted to the role of assistant to the President, but he can stay operational only if he controls the post of spokesman—which is very doubtful.

Apart from being undoubted No. 1 in the White House, Mr. Laird has many other assets. He has wide access to leaders in business, the professions, politics and even the academic world across the country. He can be Mr. Wonderful in restaffing an administration which counts as one of its signal weaknesses an absence of talent in high places—an administration which is top-light.

With the Congress in particular, Laird has the special standing of a former senior colleague. He is master of the Republicans in the House and he can be counted on to scotch quickly any pressure building up for impeachment.

He is also particularly good at dividing Senate Democrats. Henry Jackson of Washington, for example, could broaden the appeal of his incipient campaign for President by taking a lead in pursuing Watergate. But like many other cold war Democrats, Sen. Jackson turned to putty when Laird, as Secretary of Defense, drummed out martial music. Jackson and his friends will probably once more fall into the Laird pocket, thus vitiating the Democratic unity on Watergate.

Like most men so widely connected, Laird does not allow his mind



By Auth in the Philadelphia Inquirer

'White House calling! I'm the new man on this route.'

to be clogged by doctrine. He is not partial to the rigid theories of free-market economics which, as applied by Treasury Secretary George Shultz and Herb Stein of the Council of Economic Advisers, have contributed so much to rampant inflation. With Laird at the White House, congressional and business pressure for tighter controls is bound to receive more favorable consideration.

But Laird's suppleness is also his great weakness. He chops and changes a great deal. Inconstancy is his guiding light. He can be for a Rockefeller one day and a Goldwater the next. Nor is he meticulous about the arguments he uses to press his case of the day. In selling the defense program, for example, he regularly told horror stories about weapons the Russians have not even begun to test.

Mr. Laird, in other words, is not a man of high principle, crystalline in his integrity. He cannot build faith which requires more than good works. So he cannot arrest the crumbling of the Nixon administration unless the President himself can show that he is substantially guiltless of the monstrous implications which come flooding in daily from Watergate.

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