

Nixon Plans To Answer, Laird Says

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President Nixon is willing to respond to "all questions" about his role in the Watergate affair after the major witnesses have given their stories to the Senate investigating committee, the new White House domestic counselor, Melvin R. Laird, said yesterday.

In an interview with The Washington Post, the former Defense Secretary said Mr. Nixon would not "respond to every witness" but would answer "questions, all questions . . . at a press conference, "when we get near the conclusion of the hearings."

Laird said he had discussed the timing of a press conference with the President and "I think he's willing to do that . . . I don't think there will be any problem with that."

Laird also strongly suggested that despite his recent elevation on the White House staff, Ronald L. Ziegler will be replaced as the President's principal press spokesman by his current deputy, Gerald L. Warren.

"I have an appreciation for Ron's problem," Laird said. "I'm convinced he didn't knowingly mislead (the press). But from the information I've been able to get, I think it's good to have some other press spokesman for a while."

"Sometimes people are caught up in a series of circumstances where you have to make certain changes. And I think those changes will be made. I don't think you have to make a big announcement over something like that."

Ziegler, recently designated as an Assistant to the President as well as press secretary, has been under fire from press groups for providing inaccurate information to its reporters during the period of the Watergate crime and alleged White House cover-up.

Former White House counsel John W. Dean III has testified this week that

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Ziegler was rehearsed by other White House staff members for his press briefings on Watergate and was repeatedly denied knowledge of what really had taken place.

Laird said Ziegler's experience showed that "anybody who's going to brief the press has to be in every meeting."

"I think that can be changed," he said, referring to the shielding of the press secretary from vital knowledge. "I think Jerry (Warren) has to take over that responsibility, and I hope he can. I'm not sure, but I hope that he can."

In a wide-ranging interview in the west-wing White House office he has taken over from his resigned predecessor, John D. Ehrlichman, Laird also said:

- He is cutting back the Domestic Council staff he inherited from Ehrlichman and trying to shift decision-making to the Cabinet departments, but running into resistance from congressmen and bureaucrats who don't want to act "unless they get White House guidance."

- He has asked first-term domestic counselor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now ambassador to India, to suggest ways of reviving the family assistance welfare reform plan abandoned by Mr. Nixon this year after an unsuccessful, three-year effort for congressional passage.

- He is doubtful that the President's expressed wish to scrap controls and return to a free economy can be accomplished in the face of a "very difficult" worldwide food shortage, but acknowledged that the temporary freeze of market prices itself is "causing some problems" of future food supply.

Recalled to government service early this month in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the former Wisconsin congressman and Defense Secretary seemed more subdued than customary in an hour-long interview.

Asked about the mood of the White House and the President, Laird paused for a long moment and said:

"Well, of course, this is a tough period for the President. No question about

that. But I have the feeling . . . that morale about getting on with the business of government has improved."

Laird paused again, and said: "You're talking to me in one of the most difficult weeks, as far as the past is concerned, that I can think of. But if I didn't feel that we could move forward and get some of these programs working, I wouldn't be here."

The new presidential adviser said one of the "pluses" from the Watergate may be that "the operations of the Executive Branch will be strengthened."

"We just have to open this place (the White House) up," he said, "but it's not easy to

do. There's been a tendency on the part of people to concentrate everything in the White House and the White House staff. The situation has to be switched back, so the departments and the line agencies really have the staff to do the work and can carry on their consultations with the governors, the mayors and the congressmen on their own programs."

Laird said that "its going to take a little time to change" habits, after years of centralized decision-making, because "there is a tendency among some members of Congress to like having one place to call, rather than going to the departments, and there is a tendency on the part of some of the departments not to make a decision or specific recommendation unless they get White House guidance."

To counter that habit, Laird said, he had been visiting a different Cabinet department almost every day since taking his job. "I don't ask them to come here," he said. "I go there. I try to make it clear to each of the Cabinet officers that he is going to be responsible for the department, for the people he's putting into jobs, and that they're going to be responsible to him. You can't have any Cabinet officer in a position where he doesn't have complete trust and faith in the people who are working for him."

Second Laird said, he is trying to stimulate closer consultation between the departments and members of Congress.

Laird himself has taken advantage of his privilege as

gress and has appeared on the floor of the House several times in the last three weeks, engaging in long conferences with former colleagues.

As one result, he said yesterday, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has withdrawn its proposal for an education special revenue-sharing bill, the Better Schools Act, and will redraft it for next year in consultation with Rep. Al Quie (R-Minn.) and other members of the House Education and Labor Committee.

"There really had been no work done with that group up there," he said, "and they had a wealth of information and believe in the special revenue-sharing approach."

Laird said he had asked Moynihan, the chief architect of the embattled family assistance plan, to "give me some memos" on a new device for providing "income reliability" for the poor. Moynihan is in Washington for diplomatic consultations.

Laird said the welfare reform cause "was set back" in the last campaign, but added, "We have to get that idea back in the forefront."

Laird, who is flying out to San Clemente today for three days of meetings with the President, emphasized in the interview that his assignment was to restart stalled projects in the domestic side of government, and not manage the White House defense against charges of a Watergate cover-up.

But he answered without hesitation questions about the President's response to the testimony of Dean and

other, implicating him in the cover-up.

"I don't think he should respond to every witness," Laird said. "There is a problem about getting the President of the United States confined to just this one area. It shouldn't look like our President is popping out there after every witness."

"The best way to do it would be, when we get near the conclusion of the hearings, that he move out and respond to questions, all questions."

Laird said the President was "willing to do that," but that there was no agreement on the best format.

He said he thought the problem could be solved either by holding "an extra-long press conference," or through "some kind of pool arrangement," which would allow a small group of reporters to "follow through in greater depth" on questions.

(A "pool arrangement" refers to a situation in which a small group of reporters is selected to observe or ask questions for their colleagues.)

Laird said, "I am not getting involved in advising the President on that. I came over here with the understanding and assurance that he (Mr. Nixon) was not involved in the incident or the cover-up and that he first became aware of it in March."

Asked if that was still his belief, after Dean's testimony, Laird said: "I have to believe it. That's what I was told."

By the President? "Yes. I came over here with those assurances."