

Life Signs at the White House

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Although different people make different jobs of the same formal position, it is at least generally accurate to say that yesterday's disclosure of new White House appointments means that Gen. Alexander Haig will be replacing H. R. Haldeman and that former Defense Secretary Laird will be replacing John Ehrlichman. General Haig, who relinquishes a military career to do so, will become Mr. Nixon's chief administrative officer. Secretary Laird becomes his chief domestic affairs man. But when you have said that, you have pretty well exhausted the correspondences that exist between the two new men and the officials they replace. For we are dealing with two far more competent, experienced and responsible men here. It says something, we expect of the particular gifts—or lack thereof—of Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, that although they are to be replaced by a professional army officer and a recent Defense Secretary, the men who are to replace them are far less likely to organize White House affairs along para-military lines or to be so insensitive to civilian values.

It is no secret that Secretary Laird, an able politician in the better sense of that term, had privately hoped

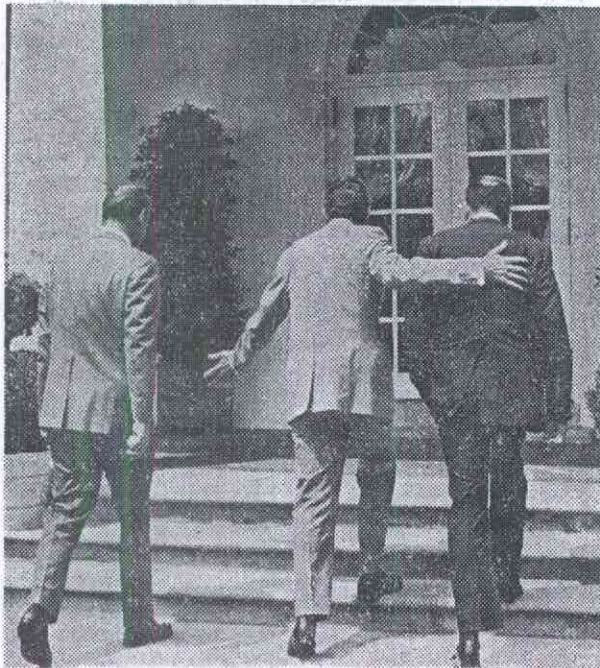


Photo by Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

General Haig, President Nixon, Secretary Laird

at some later time to involve himself in domestic affairs in the administration. And it is no secret either that he was under considerable pressure from Republican politicians and officials outside the White House to help the President by accepting these new responsibilities now, just as General Haig was under pressure from the President. Thus the circumstances of their being named to their new jobs are, in a way, as interesting and as encouraging as the fact that they will hold them. For what can be sensed in the news of these appointments is a stirring back to life in the White House and an assertion of strength and the will to survive among some very important persons in the Republican Party. That it is possible to read—especially in the Laird appointment and the Laird backing—some omens that don't bode too well for Mr. Connally's ambitions, is also a sign of political life—a sign of commitment and concern, as distinct from paralysis and despair, on the part of some highly placed party and government officials.

As with so much else in these very strange times, the key of course lies with Mr. Nixon. How differently will he allow the presidency to be organized? How much more responsive will he permit his government to be? We think it has long been plain that the President's capacity to assert effective and enlightened leadership in the wake of this disaster—his capacity, in a word, to govern—must be one critical element in the nation's ultimate Watergate judgment. To be sure, there is more to it than that. The truth must be exposed; the illegal and quasi-legal and just plain sleazy activities must stop; and there must be reassurances in which the public can have confidence that the dirty business will not be repeated. But none of this, in itself would be enough to sustain the Nixon presidency in anything more than name, if the present immobilized, understaffed, scattered condition of the government were to persist.

In selecting General Haig and Secretary Laird for their new positions, Mr. Nixon has evidently made a commitment to getting the engines of government working again. Neither man seems even remotely likely to be tempted by the curious politics of arrogance and mistrust that animated his predecessors. As a practicing politician—one who has served in elective office—Secretary Laird in particular can be expected to advise and to operate in ways that would all but foreclose the possibility of a White House or a President withdrawn from public realities and public sentiments or a political leadership indifferent to even its own and its constituents' better and more immediate interests. We can only assume the President wants it that way. We hope he does.